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Blind Men

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The Devil



The Blind Men

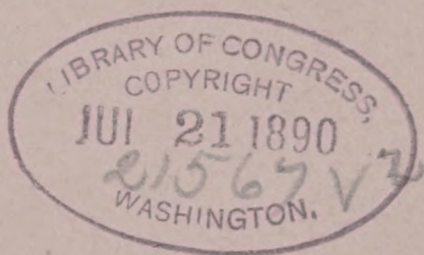
AND

The Devil

BY

PHINEAS

*pseud
John M. Hanifin*



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THE BLIND MEN AND THE DEVIL.

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To my Wife,

WHOSE PATIENCE AND CHEERFULNESS,

IN SICKNESS AND SUFFERING,

HAVE BEEN TO ME INCENTIVES OF INESTIMABLE VALUE,

THIS BOOK

IS LOVINGLY DEDICATED.

Phineas.

THE BLIND MEN AND THE DEVIL.

I.

I WAS employed as a special writer on —.

I had finished the week's work, and, lighting my pipe, I rose from the desk, and walked across the room with a sense of perfect freedom and relief, such as all writers doubtless experience at the completion of a task that had been reluctantly undertaken, when I was surprised and startled by hearing my dog bounding up the stairs, howling and barking furiously. He threw himself against the closed door with great violence. When I opened it, he rushed in and crouched in the farthest corner. He was a large mastiff, not easily frightened, but on this occasion he seemed terror-stricken. I walked toward him, and spoke encouragingly, but he continued to glare at the open door, heedless of my presence. As I turned to face the door, a stranger entered slowly, without the ceremony of knocking. He came on

straight toward me. The terrified animal sprang up, and slinking as close to the wall as possible, made his way toward the door. When within a few feet of it, he sprang out, and rushed headlong down the stairs.

I am not superstitious ; but the strange conduct of my dog troubled me. Evidently there was something about this stranger which filled the usually courageous and faithful animal with fear ; otherwise he would not have thus deserted me. I failed, however, to detect anything remarkable in the stranger's appearance. He was apparently over seventy years of age, of medium height, broad-shouldered, and doubtless had been a man of great physical strength. But he was no longer strong. Old age, or ill usage, or both combined, had reduced him to a tottering, trembling wreck. His step was unsteady, and he seemed ready to fall to the ground with weakness. He stopped in the centre of the room, and in a weak voice said, —

“You write for the newspapers?”

I nodded in the affirmative, and pointed to a chair. Paying no attention to the invitation to sit down, he tottered to my desk, and laid an open newspaper upon it,

"To whom am I indebted for this honor?" I asked.

"I'm deaf," he said.

In a slow, distinct tone I again asked, "Who — are — you? What — is — your — business — with — me?"

"Read this," he replied, "and I will then tell you who I am, and what I desire."

Seeing that I was not disposed to comply with his request, he added, "I have something to show you, but it is necessary that you first read this."

He attempted to point out the article which he wished me to read, but his hand trembled violently, and his extended finger danced over a half-dozen different articles on the page. "It is entitled 'A Mysterious Disappearance,'" he said, vainly endeavoring to hold his finger at the point upon which his eyes were fastened.

The paper was old and soiled. It was dated July 5, 1838.

"Fifty years old!" I exclaimed. "The — mystery — of — that — disappearance — ought — to — have — been — solved — long — ago."

"Read! read!" he cried.

The article in question described how a certain

John Curtis and his young wife had left Woodwardtown, some weeks before, to visit Curtis's parents in Canada. A rumor had reached the village to the effect that the couple had mysteriously disappeared, and the "confirmation of the dreadful report had just reached the office of the Woodwardtown *Lantern*."

When I finished reading, and looked up, I found the stranger's gaze fixed on my face. It was then that I first observed a peculiarity about his eyes. They were small and sunken; the eyelids were continually twitching up and down. One instant his eyes were closed, and the next wide open. His steadiest gaze was merely a succession of rapid winks, which disagreeably impressed the beholder.

"I am that John Curtis," he said. "I have been practically out of the world for the past fifty years, and have had a wonderful experience. This is a true history of what I have seen and suffered."

He drew from an inside pocket a roll of manuscript, and placed it on the desk before me, and continued, —

"You are known to the publishers. You can

sell it for me. I'll be satisfied with one thousand dollars. All over that sum shall be yours."

"Publishers — were — evidently — rich — and — exceedingly — liberal — in — your — time, Mr. Curtis."

Without heeding my sarcasm, he proceeded, —

"I'll call at this hour to-morrow for your answer."

Then he turned and left the room as unceremoniously as he had entered.

I was not disposed to forego my usual evening walk, but still I thought it well to examine the first few pages of the old man's history; and when I had begun, I found it so interesting that it was difficult to leave it. I was fascinated by its strangeness.

When my wife entered, two hours afterwards, I was still absorbed in the strange and improbable story. I told her of my visitor, and described the singular conduct of the dog.

"The man was crazy," she said. "I have heard that dogs instinctively recognize insane persons."

I did not, however, take that view of the matter. In fact, I had always found it a safe rule to adopt opinions as widely different as possible from any which my wife had ever expressed.

The old man returned the next day, as he had promised. The door was open, and he entered, and was at my side before I became aware of his presence.

"Well?" he asked.

"Your history is not complete"; and then, remembering that he was deaf, I slowly repeated, "Your — history — is — not — finished. You — do — not — tell — how — you — escaped."

He tottered to the nearest chair, and sank into it, with a look of mingled fear and horror. He remained with his head bowed for several minutes. At last he looked up, and asked, "Is it necessary that I describe *that*?"

"Yes."

"Cannot the history be published without it?"

"I think not."

He bowed his head upon his hands again, and remained in that position for a long time. Suddenly he arose and approached my desk. He was evidently laboring under intense excitement, and seemed on the point of speaking; but he checked himself, and, turning abruptly, walked towards the door, muttering, "Not to-day; not to-day." Pausing in the doorway, he turned and

faced me, saying, "I will call to-morrow or the next day ; but if you do not hear from me by the end of the week, the history becomes yours to do with it as you please." He moved slowly and stealthily away, and I have never seen nor heard from him since that day.

And now, at the end of twelve months, I feel that I have a perfect right to publish the history. Indeed, I believe it to be my duty to make it public, because such was his wish and intention.

If the said John Curtis be living, and this meets his eye, he will confer a favor by calling on me. If he is dead, or missing, his heirs or assigns, or any of them, by appearing and proving kinship, may claim the amount which I have received for the history, and which I hold subject to their demand.

Some of my friends advised me not to publish this history. They said it would be very unwise for me to permit my name to appear in connection with such a singularly improbable story. On the contrary, many of our best citizens, to whom I have submitted the manuscript, insist that it ought to be published.

One gentleman, who is a millionaire, said that he did not consider the story improbable. Another gentleman, who undoubtedly will become a millionaire in a very few years, expressed a similar opinion. Two aldermen assured me that they believed every word of the story. A gentleman who lacked only four hundred votes of being elected to the Legislature said that he regarded it as a truthful narrative; and scores of citizens, any one of whom lacked at the most but a few hundred thousand votes of being elected to the Presidency, coincided with the above opinions.

Supported by this formidable array of distinguished citizens, I have ventured to place the history before the public without giving my own opinion, simply because I am neither a millionaire nor an alderman. My opinion, therefore, is not worth the space it would occupy. But not wishing to trespass further upon the patience of the reader, I herewith submit the history, under the title of—

II.

ASCENDING MOUNT MISERY.

MY name is John Curtis. I was born and reared in St. Catharine's. Several young men of the village and of the surrounding country had emigrated to the States, and had sent back brightly colored reports of the country. My ambition was aroused by these glowing accounts, and at the age of twenty, I, too, crossed the line, and travelled southward. I had intended to go as far south as Maryland, where I had friends; but I never reached Maryland. At the end of a three weeks' journey, I found myself at the town of Wallingford. After having obtained refreshments, I wandered about the town for an hour or more, as I had done at all the other stops during the journey.

When the stage-coach was ready to resume the journey, I was pleased to find that I had a fellow-passenger. He was a young man, a few years older than I. At first he did not seem disposed to be sociable. I had been, however, the only

passenger in the coach during the two previous days, and now that I had a companion, I could not repress the inclination to talk. After a few general remarks about the weather, the country through which we were passing, and the condition of the roads, I began, young man like, to talk about myself. My companion's reserve melted immediately. He encouraged me to talk about myself. We travelled together for six hours, during which time I told everything worth telling about my affairs, — past, present, and prospective. In return he described Woodwardtown, and advised me to settle there. His name was Peter Marx, and he lived on the outskirts of Woodwardtown, with his six brothers and two sisters. None of his brothers or sisters had ever married. He was the youngest of the family, and from some remarks dropped by him, I inferred that, unlike his brothers, he was matrimonially inclined.

I finally decided to remain in Woodwardtown for a few days, and he pressed me to remain at his house until I had determined whether I would go farther or settle permanently in the village.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when the stage-coach stopped at the Woodwardtown tavern.

My first impression of the place was not in its favor. It was a small village, scattered widely over a flat, featureless country. The few trees in sight had been stripped of their leaves by the November gales, and they stood up in the afternoon sun, gray and withered looking. The one-story farm-houses, with their long, low wings and out-houses, were of a dull-brown color, and appeared in the distance cheerless and forbidding. The half-dozen narrow, white roads, which radiated from the tavern, relieved somewhat the general sombreness of the scene. These roads were made of oyster-shells, which had long since been ground into lime-dust.

While I was viewing the scene before me, Peter had been busy arranging for the disposal of our boxes, which he said would be sent for the next morning. He now joined me, and explained that after we had procured refreshments, he must call on a friend, before setting out for home. Would I wait at the tavern until his return? I willingly consented. I would, doubtless, be able to learn more regarding the village, I thought, and perhaps learn something of my new friend himself during his absence. I was not surprised

because he did not ask me to accompany him. His confused manner and flushed face convinced me that the "friend" upon whom he was about to call was the same young lady of whom he had blushing spoken once or twice during the journey.

Before we reached the tavern door it opened, and a man stepped out. He was a tall, broad-shouldered, heavily built man, and roughly clad. Under a short sack coat he wore a blue jean frock, which was much longer than the coat, and reached nearly to his knees; his pantaloons, of some gray stuff, were tucked in the tops of his heavy cowhide boots. A broad-brimmed white hat completed his attire, and brought into strong relief his hard, dark face.

When he emerged from the tavern, he turned as if to go to the wagon sheds in the rear. Without stopping, or even slackening his gait, he said, gruffly, as he passed us, —

"Got back?"

"Yes," answered Peter; and as we entered the house, he added, "That is my eldest brother, Roswell. He has his team, and you can ride up to the house with him. I'll follow you, after I've made my visit."

"But I prefer to wait for you here," I said.

"It would suit me better if you would ride up with him; you would get acquainted with him. It would save you a long walk; and, besides," he continued, in a confused, stammering way, while his face flushed crimson, "I may be detained longer than I expect."

I did not like the idea of riding several miles with the surly-looking farmer. In fact, I now regretted having accepted the invitation to remain at Peter's home during my stay in the village. But I had gone too far to recede. I could not now alter the arrangements without giving offence to my new friend.

When Roswell drove out of the tavern yard, fifteen minutes later, we were waiting for him near the front entrance.

"Mr. John Curtis will stay with us for a few days, Roswell," said Peter, as his brother drew up close to where we stood. "I have asked him to ride home with you."

"Well, climb in, John," the giant said, in a harsh tone, as he moved over to make room for me on the seat beside him. Before I was fairly settled on the seat, he drove off at a sharp trot.

I knew that Peter had been absent from home for the past two months, yet his brother had not asked him how he enjoyed the trip, nor made a single inquiry regarding it, which struck me as very singular.

At the end of five minutes or so, I remarked about the weather, not knowing what else to say. My companion, however, took no notice of the remark. The journey occupied a little over thirty minutes, and during the time I made two or three attempts to converse with the giant, but he maintained a rigid silence. He did not even turn his head to look in my direction.

The square box of a wagon rattled along the shell road at a furious rate. It was guiltless of anything resembling springs, yet my companion did not seem conscious of any discomfort, while I suffered unspeakable tortures. He finally stopped the team near a huge pile of cut firewood, and roughly dragging the blanket from my knees, he said, in his short, harsh way, —

“Get down, John, and go in there!”

I hastily dismounted, and he drove down a narrow lane, which I concluded led to his barn-yard.

"Go in there," I repeated. "Did he mean in the wood-pile?"

This immense pile towered above my head, reaching higher than any dwelling that I had seen near the tavern, or along the road which we had just travelled.

When I walked to the other side of this pile, I perceived directly behind it a large one-story dwelling. There were, however, no signs of life visible. Sounds of voices came from the direction of the farm-yard, but all about the house seemed as silent as a tomb.

I approached, and knocked on the door. In a few moments it was cautiously opened an inch or so, and a woman's face appeared at the aperture.

"Peter Marx asked me to wait for him here," I said, with some embarrassment.

The woman nodded, and then quickly closed and bolted the door.

I was greatly fatigued, and darkness was fast approaching, but still I determined to try and find my way back to the tavern. As I turned from the inhospitable door, Roswell appeared. He doubtless divined the cause of my perplexity,

for there was a faint suspicion of softness in his tone, as he said, —

“Come in, John ; come in !”

He even waited for me, with his face turned to the door, and his back toward me. My first impulse was to reject the invitation. Then I thought of the long, lonely road lying between me and the tavern, the nearness of night and my exhausted condition, and concluded to remain and make the best of it.

I followed Roswell into the house, and found myself in a large, neat kitchen, which, as I afterwards discovered, was in no wise different from the ordinary Woodwardtown kitchen. There were two women in the room busily engaged preparing the evening meal. The younger woman may not have been over thirty years of age, though she looked much older. The other was surely fifty years old. They took no notice of us when we entered. Roswell drew a chair before the fireplace, and with his white hat pulled over his eyes, and his huge, leather-colored hands resting on his knees, sat gazing silently into the fire. His sisters did not speak to him, nor even look at him. And as for me,

I was ignored as completely as if I was invisible.

Soon afterwards five men entered together, and seated themselves in various parts of the room. Not a word was uttered by anybody. After a time, Roswell turned, and looked at the table, without rising from his seat. He appeared to be counting the plates. At the end of his calculation, he turned to the fire again, and said, —

“Peter’s got back.”

His harsh voice broke the silence with the suddenness of a bell stroke. The younger woman placed another plate on the table, for Peter, doubtless; but no further attention was paid to Roswell’s remark.

Shortly after, the elder woman seated herself at the table; her sister joined her; and then the six brothers arose, and took their places at the table, also. The meal was eaten in silence. I saw Roswell glance once or twice at the vacant chair at his elbow, and at last he asked, —

“Ain’t you hungry, John?”

“No; thank you,” I replied.

When the meal was finished, the men resumed their places near the large fireplace, Roswell sitting, as before, directly in front of the fire.

The women removed the supper things, and then sat down to sew at the table, upon which a tallow candle flared and flickered erratically.

The monotonous ticking of the great wooden clock, and the snapping and crackling of the burning logs that were piled in the fireplace, were the only sounds audible.

I sat in the shadow close to the wall, for an hour, watching this singular family, and wondering if, when Peter returned, he could be induced to procure a team, and convey me back to the tavern that night.

It was nearly eight o'clock when Peter appeared. He came directly to where I sat, and seated himself beside me. None of the others took any notice of his entrance. We conversed in subdued tones for several minutes; but when I suggested going to the tavern that night, he laughed, and rising, he crossed the room, procured and lighted a candle, and motioning me to follow him, led the way to his bedroom.

I hesitated a moment in the doorway, before leaving the kitchen. I could not leave the silent group without a word of parting, as Peter had done. I gazed for a moment at the semicircle of

rough men, with the firelight chasing shadows over their hard features; and then at the two women, rapidly plying their needles, and said, "Good night, ladies and gentlemen." There was no response. My own voice sounded strangely in my ears, and turning, I joined Peter, who was waiting for me in the passage. Once fairly settled in Peter's neat, comfortable room, we talked freely.

"You think my brothers and sisters very strange, do you not?" he asked.

I admitted that I did.

"I have become accustomed to their ways," he said, "and so have the neighbors. We do not mind them; but still, I suppose, they appear to a stranger startlingly eccentric. They are, however," he musingly added, "good, kind people at bottom. They are strongly attached to me, and would willingly make great sacrifices to secure my happiness. And yet, as you saw, they paid me no attention on my return, after a long journey."

"They did not seem to be very demonstrative, certainly," I said.

From the conversation which followed, it was

plain that Peter regarded his gloomy brothers and sisters as being endowed with many virtues and graces. I did not take his view. During my brief acquaintance I had detected no evidence of hidden saintliness. Roswell is the best of them, and he is far less saint than savage, I thought; for I did not think it necessary nor advisable to confess my opinion to Peter.

III.

I SLEPT to a late hour the next morning, and was therefore spared the dismal spectacle of the family at breakfast. Peter and I breakfasted together. Susan waited on the table, while Abby was busy with other household duties.

After breakfast I accompanied Peter to the stable. He wished me to see the handsome pair of sorrels he had recently purchased. The Marxes, as I afterwards learned, had the richest and best-stocked farm in that region.

We rode down to the "Centre"—a term applied to that part of the village in which the

post-office, tavern, and stores were located — behind the favorite sorrels.

I had expressed a desire to see the Woodward-town *Lantern*, and we drove to the post-office, in which there was a counter devoted to the sale of newspapers and stationery. I stood at this counter reading the *Lantern*, and Peter was at the delivery window chatting with the postmaster, when an old gentleman entered the room. He glanced at Peter, whose back was turned, and then fixed his gaze on me. After a moment's inspection he advanced, and asked, —

“Is this Mr. Curtis?”

I answered in the affirmative. He quickly grasped my hand, saying, —

“I knew your parents. Perhaps you have heard them speak of me. My name is Forbes.”

I assured him that I was delighted to meet him. My parents had often spoken of Mr. Forbes, who had left St. Catharine's before I was born.

“Peter was at our house last night,” he continued, “and he informed us that a young man named Curtis had arrived in the village from St. Catharine's. We, my wife and I, instantly thought of our old friend, and concluded that

you must be one of his sons. We said nothing to Peter about it; he does not know that we once lived in Canada."

Peter had turned from the delivery window, and on catching sight of my companion had hastily approached.

"I did not wait for an introduction," Mr. Forbes said, addressing Peter. "I knew Mr. Curtis's family many years ago, and deem it a great stroke of good fortune to meet him here."

"Very fortunate, indeed," Peter dryly assented, while his face hardened, until in spite of his youth and fairness I detected a strong resemblance to Roswell's hard features.

"I have some business to look after this morning," Mr. Forbes said. "I desire our young friend to accompany me; will you surrender him to me for the remainder of the day?"

Peter consented, though with some reluctance, I thought; and after a little further conversation we parted, Peter going to his team, while Mr. Forbes and I walked slowly down the main street.

Mr. Forbes, so far as I could see, had no business on hand, beyond that of persuading me that

I ought to settle in the village. He said there was a good, lucrative position which I could secure immediately. Before we parted he had obtained this place for me, and had also introduced me at Mrs. Martin's select lodgings.

"Mrs. Forbes would be overjoyed to see you; you will give her that pleasure, this evening, will you not?" he asked, as he was about to leave me.

I gratefully accepted the kind invitation.

"We have tea at six," he added. "Mrs. Forbes will expect you, and you must not disappoint her."

The Forbeses entertained me pleasantly. Mrs. Forbes gave me a hearty welcome, and regretted that her niece, Alice, was not at home to aid in making it pleasant for me. Alice had gone on a two days' visit to a friend, that morning.

"Which accounts for Peter's absence," remarked Mr. Forbes.

"One would suppose that his absence afforded you relief," said the lady.

"It does not distress me greatly"; and then turning to me, he continued: "My good wife once knew a woman who had two sons. This woman was selfish, crafty, and covetous. One

of her sons grew up with his mother's faults developed and intensified. He was a selfish, inhuman monster. The other grew up frank, honest, and unselfish to a fault. With this in mind she believes that she can transform Peter into something superior to his brothers. I believe she has undertaken an impossible task. He is a Marx to the backbone. It is in his blood."

"I am a victim of misrepresentation, Mr. Curtis," the lady said; "I simply wish to give Peter the advantages of good company. His surroundings at home are brutalizing. His people are less than human. You have no idea of the sort of a life they lead."

"You forget, my dear, that Mr. Curtis was their guest last night."

The lady laid down her knife and fork and stared at me in open-eyed astonishment.

"You remained there over night, and was not frozen!" she exclaimed.

"I did not suffer from the cold in the least," I answered.

The lady bent over her plate; and I knew that she was smiling at my stupidity. Her husband came to my rescue by asking, —

"How do you like Parsons, Mr. Curtis?"

"He oppresses me," I replied.

"Oh, that will wear away when you know him better!"

"It does not in my case," said his wife. "I always find him on a very high stool, or on stilts which are yet higher."

"He is an able man, Mrs. Forbes; the *Lantern* is the best conducted paper in the State."

Turning to me he continued, —

"He asked you to write an account of your journey from Canada. You will do so, I suppose."

"I have done it."

"Did he like it?"

"I think not."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because after reading it he walked to the window, and after standing there a few minutes, he called me. A farmer had stopped to exhibit his vegetables to a shopkeeper. Other shopkeepers approached, and began to bid at once. The result was that the farmer sold his load quickly, and at a good price. Then Mr. Parsons turned and said, 'How would it have been

if that farmer conveyed his vegetables in an uncommonly elegant or grotesque vehicle?'"

"'The shopkeepers would probably have wasted some time inspecting the strange wagon,' I answered.

"'Very good,' he said. 'Now, remember, that words are the vehicles which convey thoughts. If the words are uncommonly elegant or grotesque, the reader's attention is diverted from the thought to the vehicle, which is not desirable.'"

"Ah, he thought you too elegant."

"I imagine he considered me pedantic."

"I believe," Mrs. Forbes said, with some warmth, "that he is wrong. Our writers are not too elegant; they err in the other direction."

During the months that followed I was a frequent and welcome visitor at the Forbeses. In my position as man-of-all-work about the *Lantern* office I came in contact with many people, and made many warm friends. The Forbeses, however, always held the first place with me.

Peter Marx was at the Forbeses constantly. He and I were not on friendly terms. The coolness which he had shown toward me, when he first found Mr. Forbes and me together, grew more

marked every day. My friends told me — and it was easy to see that they were right — that my intimacy with the Forbeses was very displeasing to him. He was deeply in love with their niece, and became insanely jealous whenever any one approached her. But his presence did not detract from the pleasure of my visits. Mr. Forbes and his charming wife took pains to render my visits enjoyable. They encouraged me to talk about St. Catharine's, and the older people whom they had known there. Mr. Forbes himself was an inveterate story teller; but he never would engage in an argument. He detested argument; and, it seemed to me, took a malicious pleasure in crushing argumentative people.

On one occasion he was talking with Lawyer Cable, regarding the relative merits of the rival newspapers. Mrs. Forbes was relating to me an incident which occurred when she lived in Canada, when our attention was attracted by the vehemence of the lawyer's conversation. "Sensational!" he cried. "Why, the *Rocket* is a bright paper, and seeks to entertain its readers. Do you mean to say that the *Lantern* is as good as the *Rocket*?"

Before Mr. Forbes could answer, the impetuous lawyer repeated the question with greater emphasis. Then the old gentleman slowly said, —

“I have a very intelligent horse; and, on a certain occasion, I placed a turkey, cooked and carved in the best known manner, at one end of the manger, and a quart of oats at the other. He ate the oats, but never even touched the turkey.”

Peter seldom took part in our conversation. He sat apart with Miss Burr, and seemed supremely happy in her company. I knew that Mrs. Forbes was glad to give them the privacy of the other side of the fireplace. Her husband did not appear to trouble himself about the matter. If his wife succeeded in bringing out the good that was in the young man, and in dwarfing, if not obliterating, the traits which had made his brothers objects of hate and fear throughout the village, Mr. Forbes could complacently claim that it was all done with his knowledge and consent; and if she failed, he could wisely assert that he had seen from the first what the result would be. I suspected, however, that the young lady herself disliked the arrangement. She often asked her aunt's opinion on some trifle which she was

discussing with Peter; at other times she would refer the matter to her uncle, and on one or two occasions she questioned me regarding the subject under debate. It was plain that she desired to join us on our side of the fireplace, and participate in the general conversation. I heartily sympathized with her. It was a pity to make of this lovely and accomplished girl a sacrifice to her aunt's hobby. The dark, stern young man was like wax in Alice's hands, and Mrs. Forbes hoped, with the girl's aid, to save him from his hereditary sins, and transform him into an ordinarily decent sinner. But even to accomplish that, was it worth while to destroy an angel? The angel herself rebelled against it; and I unhesitatingly joined the rebellion. No word was ever spoken on the subject by either of us. There was, however, a tacit understanding between us. We were co-conspirators struggling against a powerful conspiracy. The others misjudged me. There might have been an element of selfishness in my motives; there is an element of selfishness in the motives of most men who seek to render a service to their kind. I flattered myself, though, that I was wholly unselfish in the

matter. The others gave me credit for no motive beyond that of wishing to enter the lists as a rival to Peter. But so long as Alice did not take that view, I was not troubled by what the others believed. Things went on smoothly enough for several weeks; but the inevitable explosion, which we all dreaded, came at last.

I sat with the old gentleman listening to one of his characteristic stories; Mrs. Forbes sat near us, but her attention was divided between us and the young couple on the other side of the huge fireplace. Miss Burr, from her low chair, was watching Peter, who was leaning against the mantel. They were earnestly discussing some question, but their words were inaudible to me. Alice turned suddenly and caught my gaze.

"Mr. Curtis," she asked, "what do you think of the Rowe tragedy?"

"A horrible affair," I answered.

"Mr. Marx has labored to persuade me that if Rowe had loved his wife less his jealousy would never have driven him to commit the dreadful crime; that one's jealousy, when aroused, is mild or intense in exact proportion to the love we bear the object."

"I imagine," I said, "that love produces different effects upon different men. I believe that some men are capable of doing very unlovable things in love's name."

"Whether my theory is true or false," Peter began, in a constrained, low tone, "you will admit that a woman has no right to seek to inflame the jealousy of a man who is devoted to her?"

"But," said I, "by common report, Mrs. Rowe was innocent."

"Innocent, doubtless, of any crime; but guilty of moving in society to a degree which was displeasing to her husband. She knew his jealous nature, and knew that he could not change it."

"Then why expect the wife to change her nature? She was fond of society. If he desired a gloomy companion, who would be content to mope about the house always, why didn't he choose such a one?"

Peter no longer leaned against the mantel. He was standing erect, with the fire at his left hand, and Alice on the right, and gazing fixedly at me. It might have been only the firelight playing on his features, but I thought that for an instant

he scowled savagely, and that his whole aspect was threatening. There was a note of angry defiance in my tone, as I added, "I consider it unwise, unjust, and cruel to chain an angel in a hermit's cave simply to brighten the hermit's voluntary solitude." The words had come in spite of me, but I did not regret them. Peter continued to gaze at me, without uttering a word or moving a muscle. The Marxes were known to be men of action rather than words. My fellow-rebel sat bolt upright, her face flushed, and her eyes flashing upon me a glance of grateful admiration. Her look plainly said, "At this important crisis in the rebellion you have proven yourself a worthy ally." Mrs. Forbes bent over her work, visibly agitated. Her husband alone remained imperturbable. He had changed the conversation, and was proceeding in his kind, quiet way, as if nothing had happened. Peter soon after took his leave, and I followed him a few minutes later.

IV.

I WAS standing near the news counter, in the post-office, one evening shortly after, when Peter entered. He stood for a while looking in another direction, and evidently debating with himself. He finally turned, approached me, and said, —

“Good evening, Curtis.”

“Good evening, Mr. Marx.”

There was an awkward pause, after which he asked, —

“Do you intend to discontinue your visits to Miss Burr?”

“I intend to visit Mr. Forbes and his wife until they become heartily tired of me.” Then laughingly I added, “I’m on my way there this very evening.”

He stood directly before me, his head slightly bowed, his eyes upturned, revealing the whites, and his gaze fixed on my face. “That house,” he finally said, in a low, fierce tone, “is not large enough for you and me. One or the other of us must stay away.”

"You are not obliged to go there against your will, I suppose," I said coldly. I perceived that he was trembling with rage. As he moved away, he said in the same low tone, —

"Remember, I have given you fair warning."

"What do you mean, sir?" I cried. "Who are you that dares to dictate and then threaten me?"

He had reached the door, and passed out without another word. I had spoken hotly and loudly, and my words were distinctly heard in all parts of the room.

The evening mail had arrived a short time before, and there were a score or more of the villagers in line, each waiting for his turn at the delivery window. It was customary with them to remain, after the mail had been distributed, discussing the news, until the office was closed. On this occasion, however, each villager hastened away as soon as he obtained his mail; and when I looked up, after finishing the letter, the reading of which had been interrupted by Peter, the room was empty.

I detected the postmaster peering at me from behind the tier of letter-boxes; yet, when I approached the delivery window for a chat with

that official, as I had often done, he was buried in an official document that may have been received from Washington some twelve months before.

For several days thereafter it appeared to me that many of my acquaintances avoided me. The best of them, however, were as friendly as ever. I understood the situation perfectly.

"The Marxes have terrorized the village for years," Mr. Parsons said to me; "and although I do not share the general fear, I would advise you to be on your guard. They are accused of committing many dark deeds, yet they never have been even indicted. The officers of justice themselves dare not incur the enmity of those savage men."

I said nothing about my encounter with Peter in the post-office to Mr. Forbes, but he heard of it from other sources. Indeed, it was the talk of the town for weeks. He assured me that he did not believe the Marxes were half so bad as they were painted; but, like Parsons, he advised me to be careful. "I know, however, as a fact," he said, "that during the past fifteen years there has been no justice of the peace in the village

who would dare draw an indictment against any of the Marxes."

Peter had ceased to visit at my friend's house, and Mrs. Forbes was therefore prevented, for the time being, of continuing the work of reclamation. If she was angry at me because of my share in the matter, she skilfully concealed the fact. She was doubtless consoled by the belief that Peter would resume his visits after a time. He loved her niece, and therefore could not remain away for long.

Peter had disappeared from the village, and did not reappear until the following spring. I visited the Forbeses regularly, and was always cordially welcomed. I perceived, however, a change in Alice's manner. She still treated me with the old kindness, but she was often absent when I called, and if she did not avoid me, it was certainly apparent that she did not welcome me as eagerly as she had done when Peter was near. "She does not need my aid now," I thought. "We are no longer fellow-conspirators. The conspiracy has ceased to exist, because there is nothing now to conspire against."

As Alice withdrew herself from me, I became

conscious of a sense of pain and loneliness. The Forbes' society did not charm me as it formerly had done. I was restless and uninterested whenever Alice was absent ; and I at last began to realize that what I had mistaken for a kindly, unselfish interest, was really a much stronger sentiment. I had trifled with fire, and the inevitable had befallen me.

I was in love ! For several days subsequent to this important discovery I remained in a singularly bewildered state of mind. In the mean time I was conscious that Mr. Forbes had a secret which he desired to impart to me, but for some reason or other hesitated about doing so. I afforded several opportunities, but he did not take advantage of them. Finally, one evening, late in the spring, while we were walking slowly together in the direction of his house, he turned on me abruptly, and said, —

“You must look to yourself, young man ; your interests are suffering. Peter has a warm and clever advocate in Mrs. Forbes, while you are unrepresented by counsel, and your case suffers accordingly. I would interfere in your behalf, if it would help you ; but it would not. My inter-

ference would do you more harm than good. You must plead your own cause; and, under the circumstances, you ought to be an eloquent and effective pleader. But you ought to know the line of argument which your opponent has adopted. She usually begins by drawing a vivid picture of the wretchedness Peter suffers, and the danger that in his desperation he may do himself harm. Then she turns her attention to you. She points out that you have entered journalism, and that you may develop into a literary man; and, with emphasis, declares that literary men ought not to marry. Their wives are always lonely and wretched, because, for three quarters of the time, the husband is thousands of miles away, living in a world of his own creation. Of course I don't believe it. I'm satisfied that literary men, like blacksmiths and other Christians, are attached to their homes and their friends. I have given you a glimpse of the situation; now I'll give you a little advice. If you submit your case to the judge without argument, I'm satisfied that you'll win. If, however, the opposing counsel is permitted to continue the argument for months, I cannot answer for the result."

A few evenings later, I met Alice in the village, and accompanied her home. I had previously determined to propound the important question at the first opportunity, to "submit my case to the judge without argument," as her uncle had advised. I had paced my room the whole night after leaving him, and had prepared an eloquent little speech, more eloquent than rational, I now believe, which contained the old pledges of eternal love and devotion, that men have been making to women from the beginning, and will continue to make, I hope, to the end of time.

But now that I was at her side, this speech was of no earthly use. I had lost my hold upon it, and it had become hopelessly tangled and twisted. A few of the more striking sentences stood out clearly from the tangled mass, but by themselves they appeared strange, fantastic, and so different from our ordinary surroundings and the commonplace talk we maintained that I abandoned them altogether. The word was not spoken that evening. I spent a sleepless night, and arose the next morning ill in body and mind. I wrote a note to Mr. Parsons, stating that I could not report for duty that day. This I gave to Eddie

Martin to deliver for me. Then I walked toward the outskirts of the village. I did not heed the direction I had taken; nor had I any clearly defined ideas on any subject whatever. I came to myself somewhat, though, half an hour later, when I found myself in Laurel Lane. Alice and I had often walked together here. I reached a sharp turn in the lane, and was astonished and delighted to see the object of my troubled thoughts a few rods distant, and walking leisurely toward me. I was at her side before she became aware of my presence.

We moved slowly along together in the direction of her home. She was thoughtful and singularly silent, while I was burning with inward rage and self-contempt because of my inability to obtain sufficient control over my bewildered thoughts to confess my love.

I had given up in despair when my companion suddenly left my side, and springing up the grassy bank which skirted the lane, returned a moment later with a beautiful wild flower. Her hat had been swept from her head by a low-bending limb, and the morning sun shone slantingly upon her brown hair; her face was flushed by

exertion, her red lips slightly parted, her beautiful eyes, blue and fathomless as the sky, were flashing with pleasure and excitement. Beautiful child! No warning shadow of the dreadful fate overhanging her had yet descended to darken her young life.

I bent over to examine the flower; it was a delicate thing. The shock it had sustained when plucked from its stem had loosened its leaves, which were dropping out one by one. The child's face clouded, and her eyes filled with tears.

"How cruel!" she cried. "Why did I not let it remain hiding in its shady retreat?" and then, impulsively, "But it shall be yours to enjoy while its beauty lasts."

"Ay; to cherish and protect long after its youthful bloom has faded," I cried. "Speak, dearest; one word will make me blessed."

V.

I SHALL write nothing in this history of which I entertain any doubts. I cannot, therefore, venture to say at what hour we reached the Forbes dwelling that morning. It may not have taken over an hour, and yet it may have taken us over three hours to traverse the distance between Laurel Lane and Mr. Forbes's residence. I know, however, that he met us just inside the gate. He looked searchingly at us a moment, and then quickly looked away. During the walk up the lawn toward the house, he glanced here, there, and everywhere, but never in our direction; and how he talked! His strawberry beds were ruined; the weather was against them. The weeds exhibited wonderful recuperative powers, and, worse than all, the hens had escaped from confinement and descended on the garden. The havoc they had made was simply dreadful. I cleared my throat several times, and at last managed to say that we desired to see him and Mrs. Forbes together concerning an important matter.

His cheerful manner forsook him immediately, and in a slow, grave tone he said, —

“I warn you, young man, that if you have a writ of attachment, and have come here to levy upon my property, that I have taken the necessary precautions to prevent its removal. If you have a lawful and proper claim upon any part of the aforesaid property, you may remain here and guard the aforesaid part of the aforesaid property ; but it cannot be removed, nor any part thereof. You may as well understand this, before you attempt to serve papers upon Mrs. Forbes.”

The good lady herself joined her husband in wishing us a long life of happiness. She admitted, however, that she was a trifle disappointed. For a long time she had cherished the hope that Alice would one day become Mrs. Marx. She had hoped that Alice would be the instrument to rescue Peter from his objectionable surroundings.

“To tell the truth, Mrs. Forbes,” said the old gentleman, comfortably settling himself in an easy-chair, “you seemed willing to ruin the happiness of these two excellent young persons in your effort to save Peter, who never makes any effort to save himself. It reminds me of what I heard of

the Rev. Dr. Mills when I was over to the city. He labors incessantly among the most fallen and hopeless of humanity,—those who do nothing and will do nothing to help themselves. He is spurred on by the dim hope that out of every thousand upon whom he labors he will be able to save at least one. He is constantly working among them, but has no time to give even an encouraging word to the hundreds of manly men and brave women whom he meets daily, and who are struggling with all their strength to maintain themselves in decency ; because — ”

“ Because,” interrupted Mrs. Forbes, “ he very properly desires to give his valuable services where most needed.”

“ Because,” continued her husband, without heeding the interruption, “ in one case he merely gives a helping hand, while in the other case he can claim all the glory. If he saves but one of the wretches who engage his attention, he can point to that one and say, ‘ That is my work. Neither the person reformed nor his Creator had any hand in the reformation ; it is wholly and solely my work.’ But,” he added, with a wave of his hand, “ I ’m done ; I ’ll preach no more. These

unreasonable young people have asked us to appoint the day for them ; and they expect us to decide at a moment's notice that which they are utterly unable to decide for themselves. This is 1838," he mused ; "1839, then 1840. One year would be too short a time, I suppose. Let us say the first Monday of June, 1838, which will give you just one month in which to prepare."

"Oh, uncle !" cried Alice, "that is altogether too short a time."

"The matter was left to me," he said, in his gravest manner, "and as no formal protest was entered previous to the rendering of the decision, the decision shall stand."

Peter Marx appeared in the village about two weeks after the interview just described had taken place. I did not see him. One or other of my friends saw him every day, and they all seemed very uneasy, and apprehensive about my safety. I assured them that their fears were groundless ; but they shook their heads, and said that I did not know the Marxes yet. My well-meaning friends were a great annoyance to Mr. Parsons about this time. Being an editor, he was, in a sense, public property, and it was always proper

for any one so disposed to invade his office and occupy his time. After a few days, Peter again disappeared. My friends became more alarmed than ever. "Watch yourself," they said. "He means mischief; there is no doubt of it." Even the few who attended the wedding breakfast did not succeed in concealing their fears on that festive occasion.

On the second evening after our marriage, Mrs. Martin, my former landlady, brought me a letter. It should have been delivered a week before. The postmaster had neglected to deliver it when I called at the office. He soon after discovered his mistake, and when Mrs. Martin's little girl appeared, an hour later, he sent it to me by the child. She had forgotten the letter before she reached home, and it had remained hidden in her pocket until wash-day, when her mother discovered it. It was from home, and very brief. It stated that my mother was dying, and had expressed an earnest desire to see me. It was signed "Daniel," which was my eldest brother's name. Daniel, however, was not in the habit of writing letters. He could swing an axe with any man within twenty miles of St. Cath-

arine's, but he was not handy with a pen. It had been said of him that he would at any time rather cut and pile a cord of wood than attempt to write a letter, however short. My sister Helen had always attended to the family correspondence.

My wife suggested that Helen might be absent from home when the letter was written.

Mr. Forbes said that he disliked to offer any advice. I ought not forget, though, that the letter had been written four weeks before. It had been three weeks on the road, — mails travelled slowly in those days, — and another week in Mary Martin's pocket.

"Supposing that the letter came from your people," said he; "it is not probable that you can reach St. Catharine's in time to be of any service. For my part, I strongly suspect that this is the work of an enemy, who wishes to decoy you into a trap."

I laughed at his fears. I had no enemies. I did not regard the Marxes as enemies. Peter was doubtless minding his own affairs in some other section of the country. His brothers were certainly attending to their farm duties, and did not seem disposed to interfere with their neighbors,

Mr. Forbes called my attention to the fact that, if the letter had not been delayed, it would have reached me in time to cause the postponement of our marriage; and he suspected that such might have been the intention of the writer.

Mrs. Forbes did not take her husband's view.

"Even if Peter entertains a desire for revenge, which I doubt, what harm can he accomplish?" she asked.

"With the help of his brothers, he might do much harm," answered Mr. Forbes.

"His brothers have not acted like persons who would be likely to make great sacrifices for any one."

"It is generally believed in the village," the old gentleman gravely said, "that the Marxes never forgive; that they will follow an enemy to the ends of the earth, when revenge is the motive."

I turned to my wife, who had been silent during the discussion.

"I will submit to your judgment," she said, in answer to my look of inquiry.

I decided to make the journey, and Alice declared that she would accompany me.

VI.

IMMEDIATELY after dinner, the following day, we drove over to the tavern, in the substantial two-seated family carriage. I sat with Mr. Forbes in front; my wife and Mrs. Forbes occupied the rear seat. We reached the tavern shortly before two o'clock, and just fifteen minutes before the arrival of the stage. A large number of our friends had gathered at the tavern to wish us a safe journey. This surprised us. On the previous evening, we had agreed to say nothing about the letter to any person. Mrs. Martin was the only person, outside of our family circle, who knew its contents, and she was not considered a story-carrier. Her friends said that she never carried a story, but gave it to the first person whom she met; and, short as the time had been, it was already known throughout the village that I had been summoned to the bedside of my dying mother.

After saying good by to our friends, and having taken an affectionate leave of the Forbeses, we entered the stage and began the journey.

Nothing of importance occurred during the first ten days of the journey. Late in the afternoon of the tenth day the stage stopped at a tavern, which was larger and more pretentious than any of the other road-houses at which we had put up.

An old gentleman, with his wife and daughter, had been our fellow-passengers during the last two days, but they were now at the end of their journey. They informed us that we would get a long rest at this place. The next stage would leave at ten o'clock the following morning, and would reach the Canadian border before sunset.

After breakfast, next morning, I set out for a short walk. I perceived that we were in the heart of a thriving farming district. Red farm-houses were scattered about in all directions, as far as the eye could reach.

It was the middle of June, but still the morning air chilled me, and I soon returned to the tavern, and entered the bar-room. There were two men at the bar, drinking. One of them carried a heavy coat on his arm and a whip in his hand. He was the stage-driver, apparently. He looked sharply at me when I entered, and once or twice afterwards, while I stood talking with

the landlord, I detected him watching me intently. He turned away quickly, whenever I looked in his direction.

The conversation of the two men disclosed that the one with the coat and whip was a new driver, whom his companion, the regular driver, had been "breaking in." The new man was evidently very anxious to try it alone.

"If I can't take her through now, after a week's practice, I might as well give up the idea of ever being a stage-driver," he said.

"Oh, you'll get through easy enough!" the other said; "and then you'll be a stage-driver, eh?"

"Yes; if I reach Nettleton's all right, I'll consider myself a driver."

The expert laughed boisterously, and laying his hand patronizingly on the novice's shoulder, said, "You'll never be a driver until you can drive four horses, swing your whip, handle the brake, hold an umbrella, and smoke a cigar, all at one time, and still have one hand loose to shake at the girls in the farm-houses."

I saw that the new driver paid for all the drinks, and while he drank very little himself,

he appeared desirous that the other should drink freely, and the other seemed willing to comply.

I soon after went up-stairs to join Alice, who was busy preparing to resume the journey.

The stage started at ten o'clock, with the new driver in charge. We rattled along for an hour at a lively gait. At the end of that time, the driver had trouble with his horses. He endeavored to turn them to the right, into what appeared to be nothing more than a lane, but they seemed unwilling to leave the main road. He cracked his whip and shouted to the animals, and after a time obtained the mastery. We tore through the narrow lane at a furious pace.

The forest on both sides was dense and dark, and crowded close upon us, the longer branches often sweeping the roof and sides of the stage.

I conjectured that, being a new driver, he desired to make the best time possible, and that this lane was a short cut to the next road-house.

At the end of fifteen or twenty minutes he pulled his horses down to a walk, and sounded three long blasts with his horn.

"Ah ha!" I thought, "he is not sure of the road, and blows his horn in the hope of attracting

some person, who can direct him aright. But how can he expect to be answered in this wild and apparently uninhabited region?"

He sounded the horn again, and it was answered. Or was it an echo? He stopped abruptly, and cried out, "Somebody hurt, sir, and calling for help!"

"Then, why don't you go to their assistance?" I exclaimed, opening the door and springing to the ground.

"Because I can't leave the horses, sir."

"Help! help! In Heaven's name come quickly! I'm dying! I'm dying!" came in a voice of agony from the thicket. It was a woman's voice, and the sufferer was not far distant. Alice had alighted; and when I forced my way through the thick underbrush, she followed.

Ten or twelve feet from the roadway we came upon a small open space, six or eight feet square. Near one edge of this clearing an old woman lay upon the earth, rolling, writhing, and struggling, seemingly in awful agony.

As Alice bent over the sufferer, I heard a quick step close behind me, and before I could turn I received a crushing blow on the head, followed

quickly by another and another. I reeled against a tree, my hands upraised to ward off the cruel blows. With a piercing shriek Alice sprang toward me, and fell senseless at my feet; and then I, too, lost consciousness.

VII.

WHEN I regained my senses, I found myself in the midst of a tremendous uproar. I had been conscious of it before my senses fully returned. I would gladly have returned to insensibility to escape from it, so cruelly did it oppress and torment me. It was a dreadful noise. It did not seem to come from any particular direction; the awful roar appeared to be all about me, everywhere. It beat upon me with merciless force and persistency. It beat upon my temples, breast, and limbs. It rendered me insensible to the excruciating pains which must have otherwise racked my bruised and lacerated body. It was a terrific roar! Mortal could not imagine, much

less describe it. The simultaneous discharge of a thousand heavy cannons would be inaudible there. If the earth's crust were pierced where the Atlantic is deepest, the thunder of the mighty ocean rushing through the orifice would not exceed this tremendous roar.

I could not long endure it. I could not remain there and live. But when I endeavored to rise, I discovered that I was bound hand and foot. I was lying on my right side, my back resting against a ledge. I could not determine whether this ledge was many feet high, or merely a low ridge. The rocky bed upon which I was stretched was covered with an inch or so of water; but I could not judge whether the water was rising or receding. Then the horrible thought flashed through my brain, that I had been placed there to recover consciousness in time to behold the relentless waters rising to engulf me.

Had the fiends remained to witness the consummation of their infernal plot? No; that was not probable. No living creature would voluntarily remain in that dreadful place. At that instant, a face was thrust into mine, and as suddenly withdrawn. In the dim light I had not

recognized the features, but I fancied the face wore a hideous grimace.

When my eyes became accustomed to the darkness, I could faintly distinguish objects in front of me. Behind and above me, however, it was black, impenetrable gloom. I was lying near the edge of a large basin, which had been formed by the cataract that tumbled into it at the other side. At first, I thought that this cataract caused the great noise of which I have spoken. But, no ; a thousand cataracts like it could not produce that awful roar.

The surface of the basin near me was comparatively smooth, being broken only by small waves which followed one another quickly, and swept over the rocky edge upon which I was stretched. At the other side of the basin, where the cataract fell, the waters were boiling and seething in a violent manner. While I gazed in that direction, I perceived that an object, which had been tossed hither and thither by the troubled waters, had at last escaped beyond the eddy, and was drifting swiftly toward me.

As it approached I was horrified by the discovery that it was a human head. The face was

turned away, and the long white hair floating out behind in a thick mass on the dark surface of the basin. The ghastly thing approached swiftly, rising and falling with the action of the water. I saw that it must strike the edge of the basin, very near where my head rested. I struggled to rise, but could not. When less than twenty inches away the head slowly turned until the face came in full view. I instantly recognized it as the face of the old woman who had decoyed us from the stage. Overcome with horror, I closed my eyes for an instant. When I opened them again the hideous thing, with its dead, staring eyes, was rising and falling within two inches of my face. I struggled and tried to shriek, but could not hear the sound of my own voice. I did succeed, though, in snapping the cords with which my arms were fastened; doubtless they had been weakened by contact with the rocky surface upon which I lay. Struggling to a sitting posture, I tore the cords from my feet. Glancing over my shoulder I beheld the ghastly head, its contorted face turned toward me, rocking to and fro over the very spot where my head had rested a moment before. While I remained stretched along

the edge of the basin, my body had formed an obstruction which prevented the floating head being forced out upon the rocky edge.

How many times, while I lay there insensible, had the hideous thing been washed up against me to be swept back again by the eddying waters of the basin !

Having released my feet, I groped with one hand along the ledge against which my back had rested. It was not more than one or two feet high.

I was weak, and my limbs were stiff and sore. I dare not rise to my feet, fearing that I would stagger into the basin ; but crawling on my hands and knees, I made my way toward an object which was dimly visible a few feet distant. When nearer, I perceived that it was a woman. She lay along the edge of the basin in nearly the same position in which I had found myself. One glance at the white face filled me with terror and anguish. It was Alice ! My poor wife ! She, too, in this dreadful place ! She was insensible, perhaps dead.

I caught her in my arms, and rising to my feet, turned my back on the basin and the faint light,

and staggered into the darkness beyond. Frenzy gave me strength; I did not know where my steps were leading to. My only desire was to get beyond that mighty roar, that I might speak to Alice; call her by name, even if she did not answer.

The surface under my feet was rough and hard, and I soon sank down exhausted.

After a brief rest I endeavored to rise and resume my flight; as I struggled up, my hand touched what seemed the face of a solid wall. A hasty examination proved the correctness of my surmise. Alas! it was then as I had feared: this wall, the rocky floor, the impenetrable darkness, and the dreadful roar, all pointed to one conclusion. We were prisoners in an underground cavern.

I groped back toward the place in which I had left my unconscious wife; but before it was reached my hand came in contact with an object which, benumbed though as I was, sent a thrill of horror through my whole frame. It was a skeleton. I sank down in despair beside my wife's senseless form.

There was, then, no escape from the dreadful

place. If there was an exit anywhere, surely this wretched being, whose bones I had disturbed, would have found it.

But how came we here? What infernal agencies were employed to deposit us in this seemingly sealed tomb? I asked myself the question many times, but could not find a satisfactory answer.

It was, however, barely possible that we had been carried over the cataract, and by it swept into the cavern. The fiends had, evidently, bound our hands and feet, and lashed us together, — that was abundantly proven by the arrangement of the ropes I had found on my person, and on my wife's also, — then having attached a weight sufficient to sink us to the bottom, they had cast us into the river. But this weight was not heavy enough to prevent our being swept toward the cataract by the strong current. Held close to the bottom we plunged over, not on the surface of the great cataract, but close to the face of the precipice over which it falls. The mouth of the cavern, in which we were held prisoners, was in the face of this precipice. A tongue-shaped mass of rock projected outward and upward from the

cavern's mouth, and entered the cataract on the inner side, far enough to detach a sheet of water about twenty feet broad and several feet in thickness. The water, thus separated from the great cataract, rushed through the cavern's mouth, and formed the small cataract which fell into the basin already spoken of. Held back by the weight, we had fallen inside the tongue instead of shooting out with the main body of water, and had been carried, by the small cataract, into the basin, to be afterwards washed out upon its rocky edge.

Supposing this to be the solution of the mystery, — and I have not since discovered a more plausible one, — the presence of the old woman's head can be explained.

Having served their purpose, the villains, fearing to let her live with a knowledge of their crime, had fastened a weight to her body, and then tossed her into the river. The current had swept her over the cataract, but from some cause or other she had not descended inside the tongue nor outside of it, but fell squarely on its upper edge. The action of the water had rendered this edge as keen as a razor, and when the miserable creature's body fell upon it the head was com-

pletely severed from the body, the headless trunk plunging down with the main cataract into the river far below, while the head itself was carried through the mouth of the cavern and into the basin, to be tossed and buffeted by its churning waters.

All this flashed through my mind as I sat there, my head bowed on my breast, in the midst of that incessant thunder, and enveloped in dense darkness.

I soon after arose, lifted my unconscious wife in my arms, and struggled forward, determined to ascertain the extent of the prison.

Owing to my weakened condition I was forced to stop and rest at the end of every few rods.

Just after the third rest I discovered that I was descending a steep incline. The floor of the cavern became smoother as I proceeded; and, before I came to the next rest, it seemed to me that the dreadful noise had diminished slightly. I might yet find a place in the cavern comparatively free from it. The thought gave me strength, and I pushed forward more vigorously than ever. I continued, with frequent rests, travelling down the steep incline for perhaps two hours. It seemed a much longer time. The

great noise, that had so powerfully oppressed me, had rapidly diminished during the last hour. I was at the foot of the descent; the floor of the cavern was level and smooth here.

I was so weak that I could scarcely stand, and was consumed by a burning thirst; but, by resting frequently, I managed to struggle on for another hour. At the end of that time I was startled by strange sounds, which seemed directly ahead, although a great distance off. Heavy masses of rock falling upon the cavern's rocky floor would produce sounds somewhat similar. Perhaps a portion of the roof was falling in. If that were true, there might yet be a chance of escape. But no; these sounds came at regular intervals, which would not be the case if they were caused by the falling of the roof. What produced those strange sounds? What did it all mean? I stopped for another rest; and, having deposited my wife's insensible form upon the stony floor, was about to straighten up when I was suddenly seized with a strange dizziness, and staggering back, would have fallen, but fortunately my extended hand struck against a wall which afforded me support.

When the sensation of dizziness had passed away, I began to examine this wall. Its surface was smooth, and a brief examination convinced me that it was not a wall of the cavern; it was the work of human hands. It was made of cut stone. I could easily trace with my fingers the mark of the workman's chisel, and the seams where the blocks were joined together. Further examination revealed that this was the side wall of a large stone building. I groped along this wall until I reached the front of the building, and found the doorway. It was very narrow, being not more than two feet wide. It was perhaps eight feet high, and arched at the top. By thrusting my arm into this narrow entrance, I discovered that it was closed by a smooth, tightly fitting stone. I fancied that this stone yielded slightly when I bore against it; but before I could determine whether it was a fact or mere fancy, I was roughly seized from behind, pulled backward, and thrown to the ground with violence.

"If you attempt to move, I'll beat out your brains," said a stern voice at my ear. The speaker was evidently bending over me. I had

not the power to rise, even if I had wished to do so. I had struck the stony floor with great force, and the shock had rendered me helpless and nearly senseless. I lay perfectly still, while a wave of relief and joy swept over me.

The stranger's voice was sweet music, even though it was an unfriendly voice, and conveyed a brutal threat. The presence of a human being, after those long, lonely hours of despair, afforded me intense happiness.

"Why don't you let the fellow get up, Hart?" some one near by asked.

"I'm not holding him down," Hart replied. "Come, sir, get up!" he said, addressing me; and an instant after he added, "There are four of us; therefore, the less trouble you give, the better it will be for yourself."

"I do not wish to give unnecessary trouble, gentlemen," I said. "Indeed, I am overwhelmed with joy at meeting you. I have not —"

I was here interrupted by a general laugh, which was long and hearty, and in a tone of derision Hart asked, "Then why don't you stand up?"

"I'm too weak to rise," I answered. "I have suffered severely, and the fall I sustained a mo-

ment ago has deprived me of the little strength I had."

"You seemed strong enough to attempt breaking into the temple," he said, catching me by the shoulders as if to assist me to my feet. But he quickly withdrew his hands with a cry of astonishment. "Sergeant! sergeant!" he cried, "just feel of his shell!" An instant later the four men were passing their hands over my clothing, and uttering exclamations of surprise and wonder.

"Who are you? Where did you find this?" the one whom I judged was the sergeant asked, clutching the lapel of my coat in the mean time.

"I am John Curtis," I answered. "My clothing was purchased in Woodwardtown."

"Where?"

"Woodwardtown."

There was silence for a moment, and the sergeant evidently moved away, for his voice sounded from a distance when he commanded, "Bring him along. If he won't walk, throw him into the cart."

"You've made a mistake, Curtis," the one called Hart said in a low tone, as he helped me to rise. "You should have tried a different game."

One of the worst of our enemies has just escaped from the sergeant. The rascal pretended to be insane, and thus threw the sergeant off his guard. But he will not be deceived the second time by that trick. You ought to have tried another."

"I don't understand you," I said, in the low tone in which he had spoken. He said no more to me at that time, but called one of the others to assist in placing me in the cart.

While they were thus engaged, I informed them that my wife was lying insensible a short distance away.

The sergeant, who in the mean time was walking slowly away, now turned and angrily demanded, "What does the fellow want? Why don't you bring him along?"

"He says his wife is close by, and he asks us to search for her."

"Have you got him in the cart?"

"Yes."

"Then come on, without further delay."

"Sergeant," I cried, "my wife is lying unconscious a few rods away. Will you let her remain there to die?"

"Where is she?"

Hart covered my mouth with his broad hand, and answered for me.

"He says she is near the temple, sir."

"Pabor, go back and find the woman."

A few minutes later Pabor's voice was heard in the distance: "I've found her; but she's dead, I think."

"Let her remain, then, and we'll send for the body."

"Oh, no!" I cried. "Do not leave her there. She is not dead. Bring her to the light, and you'll be convinced that I speak the truth."

"She is certainly dead," said Pabor, as he approached.

I struggled to rise, but Hart held me down, and while holding a hand tightly over my mouth, hissed in my ear, "Fool! The sergeant's patience can't last much longer. His next command will be to knock out your brains."

But he was wrong. For, after a moment's hesitation, the sergeant said, "If she is dead, the wretch himself has killed her. We'll take the body along, and have him convicted of two crimes instead of one."

VIII.

MY poor wife's insensible form was placed in the cart beside me, and the party started forward through the thick darkness, at a rapid rate.

So far as I could judge, they proceeded in this fashion: the sergeant ahead, with Pabor and a companion following, drawing the cart, while Hart walked close behind.

How could they move so rapidly in the darkness? And why had they not provided themselves with lanterns?

"Where are you taking us?" I at length asked. There was no reply, although I fancied the sergeant muttered something.

I chafed my wife's cold hands, and did what I could, in my cramped, uncomfortable position, to restore her to consciousness, but I could detect no signs of returning life. "Doubtless she is dead, as Pabor asserted," I thought, with a groan. "But why do I grieve? It may be better for her. I do not know what the near future has in store for me."

My gloomy thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a gleam of light shooting through the darkness. As it approached, my eyes became accustomed to the glare, and I easily distinguished the form and features of the man with the light. He was tall and muscular, and strangely clad. He wore a close-fitting shirt-like garment, fastened at the throat and waist, and extending to the knees; from the knees down, his limbs were covered with leggings of the same brown material. His shoes and the jaunty turban which covered his head seemed made of the same stuff also. His peculiar-shaped lantern hung suspended from his left wrist by a cord or strap; from his right wrist there hung a short, murderous-looking bludgeon, which, as I afterwards discovered, was made of flint or some equally hard substance. He approached near enough to bring my companions within the small ring of light, and I was amazed to perceive that they were dressed in the same peculiar fashion as the new-comer. They carried clubs, very similar to the one carried by him, suspended from their wrists in the same manner. But all except the sergeant were without turbans or head covering of any kind. The ser-

geant wore a turban very like that worn by the stranger. The latter seemed to sweep the party with a quick glance, and then fasten his gaze upon us as we lay stretched side by side in the small cart. This cart seemed made of stone, and I afterwards learned that I surmised correctly. The wheels, axles, body, and all other parts were stone.

When the stranger saw that I returned his look, he placed a finger on his lips, and shook his head warningly, as if to imply silence. But I was too much surprised to speak. Besides, Hart had told me that my tongue had already done me great harm, and Hart had shown me little kindnesses from the first, and given proofs of a friendly interest.

The conduct of my companions astonished me greatly. They took no notice whatever of the stranger, or his welcome light. They did not speak to him, nor even slacken their speed, but continued on at the same swinging gait, and passed on into the darkness, leaving him standing gazing after us.

For fifteen minutes or more we journeyed in silence, the footsteps of my four companions and the low rumble of the cart being the only

sounds heard in the vicinity. I could, however, hear in the distance the strange sounds — of which mention has been made — more distinctly than ever. We were evidently approaching them. I very much desired to question Hart about them, and about other matters of greater importance to me, and was on the point of doing so when I was startled by the sergeant's voice close to the cart.

"Hart," he said, "I'll leave you in charge. I must report at headquarters."

The sergeant's departure afforded me great relief. Hart still continued to walk behind the cart, and I ventured to ask him for an explanation of my surroundings. But at my first word, he struck the side of the cart a savage blow with his weapon, and roared out, —

"Silence ! sir ; not a word !"

Ah ! he was in command, now. And how easily a stupid man is transformed into a tyrant by a little brief authority ! I made no further attempt at speech, during the remainder of the journey.

Soon after this, I detected a faint roar very like the sound of the sea breaking on a rocky

shore at a great distance. It grew louder and louder as we proceeded, and I fancied that there was something strangely familiar in its swelling tone.

Was it the human voice? Was this roar caused by the combined voices of many thousands of human beings? Was it the din of a great city? Surely, yes; I could already distinguish the individual cries.

There were the shrill notes of women and children, and the hoarser cry of the men. A few moments more, and we were in the thick of the multitude.

Men, women, and children, as I knew by the sounds about me, were rushing hither and thither in the awful darkness. Yet there seemed to be no collisions. "What a strange people! And what a horrible place!" I thought, with an inward groan.

Thank Heaven! My poor Alice sleeps on, unconscious of it all.

The sounds, which I had first supposed to be caused by the falling of masses of rock, were now very close, and came from several directions. First, a low, grating, grinding noise that made my

flesh quiver ; then a loud report, followed by a long rattle that sounded like the falling of a shower of small stones on the rocky bottom.

All this time my companions were hurrying on as rapidly and seemingly as carelessly as if it were broad daylight, instead of impenetrable darkness.

They halted at last. Two of them assisted me from the cart, and up two or three steps. I was conscious that we passed through a narrow doorway, and across a smooth stone floor, for thirty paces or so. Then my conductors halted, and stood on either side, supporting me.

"Curtis," cried Hart, in an authoritative tone, "tell your story to Stevens."

I did not see Stevens, nor any one else, in fact. I knew that the three men — Hart and his two companions — were near ; indeed, two of them were supporting me. But I saw no one.

"Why don't you begin, Curtis?" Hart impatiently asked.

I began immediately. I gave a faithful account of my adventures from the time I left Woodwardtown up to the moment that I was seized by Hart and his companions.

I was listened to in perfect silence during the

recital, and my voice sounded hollow and unnatural.

When I finished, a voice directly in front of me asked abruptly, —

“Are there any corrections you wish to make in that story?”

“None,” I answered.

“That’s all, Hart,” said the invisible speaker. “Do your duty.”

At that instant a light pierced the darkness, and a quick step was heard approaching. My eyes had become accustomed to the light by the time the light-bearer had reached my side, and I could clearly distinguish surrounding objects. The man to whom I had told my story stood directly before me on a slightly raised stone platform.

There were five or six men ranged on either side of him. All of them were clad in the brown shirts already described, and all were armed with the short stone bludgeons.

When the light fell upon the faces of the men before me, I perceived that they were blind, every one of them! I turned to the two upon whom I leaned for support; they were blind! I looked

at Hart, who was a little to the right; he was blind also! A cold wave of superstitious horror swept over me; my knees trembled, and I would have sunk to the floor but for the support given me by the men at my side.

An exclamation from the light-bearer caused me to turn in his direction.

He, certainly, was not blind. He was gazing at me in open-eyed astonishment. He reached out and felt of my garments, uttering exclamations of wonder in the mean time.

"Doctor," said Hart, "I sent for you, because the prisoner needs your assistance."

"Very well," responded the light-bearer. "Take him to a cell, and I'll follow."

As I was led away, the light from the doctor's lantern afforded me a good view of the place. It was a large, circular stone chamber, with a vaulted roof. At the other side, and directly opposite the platform at which I had stood a moment before, was a large arched doorway. It was the main entrance to the building. The sides of the chamber were pierced with smaller doorways which led to small chambers or cells. I was taken into one of these by the blind men,

and conducted to a bed in one corner. This bed was simply a number of blankets of thin, soft leather spread upon the stone floor. I sank upon it, and the two men walked from the cell. The next moment the doctor entered. He carried his light, and was followed by Hart, who remained at the other extremity of the cell while I underwent examination.

"You are covered with blood and bruises, but have sustained no serious hurt," said the doctor.

Then raising the lantern to my face, he started back with a half-suppressed exclamation of surprise. He held the light close to my eyes for an instant, and then asked, —

"Have you any friends on the Plain?"

"The Plain?" I repeated, inquiringly. He shrugged his shoulders impatiently, and turned away.

I heard him say to Hart, as they left the cell, that I was covered with blood and needed a bath, "A change of shell — strip off that unsightly thing he now wears. No man could live a month clad as he is. After that, he will need food and rest only."

In a short time Hart returned.

"I have brought you some food," he said, placing something on the floor near the bed. He spoke kindly, and I mustered sufficient courage to ask him about Alice.

"She is in the female department," he answered. "The doctor says she is still alive, but he has little hope of her recovery." After a pause, he added, —

"Curtis, your life will be prolonged by her death."

I groaned, and he continued, "If she dies, you will be punished for killing her. One year in prison is the penalty for murder; and you must serve that year before you can be executed for the other crime. If she recovers, your execution will take place immediately after the trial."

"What other crime am I accused of?" I sadly asked. He uttered an angry exclamation, and then remained silent for several minutes.

"Why don't you take the refreshments I brought you?" he finally asked. I found the pitcher of water he placed near the bed and drank eagerly of its contents. He then gave me something that at first touch seemed like a rough-skinned banana. It was almost tasteless, with a

faint flavor which reminded me of the butternut. I ate heartily of this strange food, and was greatly refreshed. Hart then conducted me to the bath, and after bathing I dressed myself in a suit of "shell" which he had procured for me. He led me back to the cell, and when I had sunk upon the bed he turned and walked out of the cell without speaking. Indeed, he had not spoken a word during the last half-hour that he spent with me. If I had asked no questions, he might have talked on, and have given me some insight into my situation. I would be more discreet in the future. While yet troubled with this thought, sleep came to my relief.

IX.

WHEN I awoke I was conscious of voices just outside the cell door; and from some words that reached me, I judged that two persons — Hart and another — were inspecting the garments which I had worn, with great curiosity. "Yes; you may talk with him," Hart said, "but it will

do you no good. He will not admit that he knows anything. He pretends to be ignorant of the simplest things, — things that are familiar to the smallest child in the procession.”

“Perhaps his ignorance is not assumed,” said the other. “It is possible that he came from another and very different procession.”

Hart laughed, and said, —

“I don’t believe it. I’m convinced that he pretends to be a fool, hoping to thus escape the penalty of his crimes. However, when he has had his sleep out you may talk with him, and judge for yourself. I cannot disturb him. The doctor says he must be allowed all the sleep he requires.”

“Oh, certainly !” said the other ; and then with a touch of bitterness he added, “Restore him to perfect health, that his death may be the more painful.”

Soon after I heard them approach, and at the same time my cell became brightly illuminated. One of them carried a light, evidently. They stopped just outside the cell door, and continued the conversation in lower tones. They finally moved away, but the light remained. When their

footsteps could no longer be heard, I arose from the bed and hastened to the door of the cell. Just outside, on the floor of the main chamber, I found a peculiarly shaped stone lantern, or lamp, just as I had seen with the doctor. I raised it and looked about the large circular chamber. It was empty. In the distance I saw the raised platform before which I had stood and told my story some hours before.

I afterwards learned that when there was but one prisoner in the building, as in the present case, the guard was removed from the main chamber, upon which the numerous cells opened, the one exit from this chamber being always well guarded. I had just decided to make an examination of the place, when I detected the sound of approaching footsteps. Withdrawing quickly into my cell, I placed the lamp on the floor, and sank upon the bed and listened. The new-comers proved to be Hart and his companion. They entered the cell and approached me. The lamp I had appropriated illumined the little stone cell, and I obtained a good view of Hart's companion. He was of medium height, broad-shouldered, and athletic looking. He carried his

head high, in a way that reminded me of Selectman Luddington, of Woodwardtown. But Luddington had a dull, vacant face, which was all the more disagreeable because conspicuously paraded. This stranger, though, as he stood beside the bed and bent his kindly gaze upon me, had the thoughtful, half-sad, half-earnest expression of the tireless enthusiast. I liked this man's looks. Hart had withdrawn when he discovered that I was awake; and the stranger, seating himself on the edge of the bed, began the conversation by remarking that perhaps the presence of a light would render my prison less gloomy.

"But it is yours," I said.

"It is yours, if you wish it," he answered; "I can spare it. A walk home in the dark will serve me. I often walk without a light, to improve my sense of feeling and hearing, and to keep me in touch with my friends."

"It will be taken from me as soon as it is discovered," I said, ruefully.

"How will they discover it?" he asked.

"They're all blind, then!" I cried in astonishment.

"Were there no blind people in the procession

to which you belong?" he asked, fixing his gaze searchingly on my face.

"I belong to no procession," I replied. "I came from —"

"Never mind," he said, with an impatient gesture. "I have heard your story from Hart. It ought to be modified somewhat." After a moment he added, "Curtis, you can be of great service to me, and perhaps I can render you some service in return. I am struggling with a difficulty far greater than that in which you find yourself. Yours is merely a matter of life and death to you; mine is a matter of great importance to all the people of this generation. You can help me, if you choose. Think it over, and I will call and see you again." He had risen from the bed, and was moving away.

"Who are you?" I cried.

"My name is Hill."

"Mr. Hill —" I began; but at the first word he turned fiercely and advanced a step toward me, in evident anger. Then he checked himself, and after a momentary struggle he asked, in a tone in which there was still a trace of anger, —

"Are you really ignorant of the fact that you have applied an offensive title to me?"

"Title!" I gasped. "What title did I use?"

He looked steadily at me a moment, and then in a kinder tone he said, "'Mister' is not applied to any one here. Those who live on the heights can use that title; the rest of us have no right to it. But," he continued, "what did you wish to ask me?"

"About my wife," I answered. "I am in an agony of suspense concerning her."

"Ah, yes! I had forgotten that I have news for you regarding her."

"Have you seen her?" I exclaimed.

"No; male visitors are not allowed in the female prison; but I have seen Mother Russell. She says that Sister Curtis has regained consciousness, and is recovering rapidly. You may make your mind easy about her. Mother Russell, kind soul, has consented to attend her in person, and I have made arrangements —" He checked himself suddenly, but after a moment's silence resumed: "Never mind the rest, until you see me again. Ponder upon what I have said. If you can bring yourself to give me the

information I need, you will have no cause to regret having befriended me."

When he reached the door, he turned and said, "Don't insist on that strange story of yours. You will make enemies every time that it is repeated. Maintain silence, if you cannot tell something more probable." The next instant he was gone.

Hart entered soon after, with a stone pitcher filled with water, and a small stone tray, upon which I found one of the rough-skinned, banana-shaped rolls of which I have already spoken. These people, as I subsequently ascertained, subsisted entirely on these rolls; they had no other article of food. They named it "subsistence," but it had been abbreviated to "sub," and was rarely called anything else. Although having very little flavor of any kind, it was excellent food, wholesome and nutritious, as I had very good reason to know.

Hart stood near the bed without speaking a word, until I had finished the simple meal. Then, as he was about to depart with the empty tray and pitcher, he said, "The sleeping turn will soon begin, and you will not be disturbed

for eight hours. Get all the sleep possible. You need it." I signified a desire to sleep, and he left me.

Shortly after, the loud, harsh, crushing sounds, of which I have made mention before, ceased. This was the signal that the sleeping turn had begun. The word "day" was unknown here. In fact, there was no day. It was night always, the blackest of black nights. Time was divided between the sleeping turn and the marching turn. In the latter period there were sixteen hours, and eight only in the former. All necessary labor was performed during the marching turn, the other period being devoted to sleep, as its name implies.

I did not, however, intend to sleep. I had awakened from a refreshing slumber but a few hours before. I had regained much of my strength, and determined, with the aid of the lantern left me by Hill, to examine the place.

Seizing the lantern, I emerged from my cell into the large main chamber. It was empty, as I had supposed.

I proceeded toward the raised platform, hoping to find there a weapon of some kind with which to

defend myself. I peered into several of the empty cells which I passed on the way. They were all small, and in other respects similar to the one I had occupied. I found nothing in them that would serve me as a weapon, and my search in the neighborhood of the platform was also fruitless.

Just back of the platform I discovered stone steps leading down through the solid rock floor. Doubtless, they led to Stevens's quarters. Stevens was the blind man to whom I had related my story when first brought to the place. He seemed to be chief in authority.

I hesitated about descending these steps, and while I was still debating the matter with myself, I was startled by the sound of approaching footsteps. They came from the direction of the main entrance, at the other side of the chamber. I quickly descended a few steps, and sat down, with my head just below the level of the floor. My first impulse was to conceal the lantern in the folds of my long leather shirt; but then I remembered these people were blind, and could not be aware of the light, and it would give me a decided advantage over them.

The new-comers stopped at the platform. There

were two of them, and I instantly recognized their voices. "Pabor and the sergeant!" I mentally ejaculated.

"Stevens is asleep, of course," the sergeant said, seating himself on the edge of the platform; "he's always asleep when not smoking."

"That's because you give him little to do," responded Pabor.

"It's true, I don't keep him busy. I do, however, bring him in valuable game. That Curtis, for example, is, I'm sure, one of the most skilful villains afoot."

"I suppose he's one of Easter's gang?" Pabor asked.

"No doubt of it," the other replied. "His capture was the most important that has been made in a long time. It ought to bring me promotion."

"But it was Hart that captured him, not you."

"But wasn't I in command at the time?"

"Oh, yes; the commander always gets the credit due his subordinates."

"To whom should the credit go, if not to the man who directs and controls the stupid crowd?"

"Then, if by reason of Hart's stupidity the fellow had escaped, it would be your fault, eh?"

"Nonsense, Pabor; you were always an envious rascal; but you're getting worse. You actually emit poison with every breath."

"You ought not to be the first to accuse me of being envious," said Pabor, sullenly.

"I'm not, if that's any consolation," said the other, laughingly; "everybody has said it long before me. I'm among the last to bring the charge against you, my dear fellow."

Pabor had walked off a few steps; he now turned, and gruffly asked, "What secret do you wish to confide? Why did you bring me here?"

For the remainder of the time the two men sat close together on the edge of the platform, conversing in low tones. I overheard enough of their conversation to reveal to me that these men were called guardsmen, and that they were plotting to ruin a brother guardsman named Leete. This Leete had been very successful, and had therefore excited the envy of his fellows. The sergeant had discovered that an institution called the Farren Temple was being systematically robbed. He had also discovered that the person guilty of robbing this temple was a public official of great influence. He had informed Leete of the robbery,

but had withheld the name of the robber. The clever Leete would quickly get on the track of the guilty person. Then the sergeant and Pabor would lay before this thieving official manufactured evidence, which tended to show that Leete was robbing this temple himself, but all the while striving to fasten the guilt upon "your Excellency." His Excellency, with the aid of the evidence supplied by Pabor and the sergeant, would turn and crush the unfortunate Leete. Thus Pabor and the sergeant would be rid of a powerful rival, and at the same time earn the eternal gratitude of a very high and influential public official.

They had come to this secluded place to arrange the details of the plot, and when they had perfected their plans they walked away together. I watched them until they disappeared through the main entrance, at the other side of the chamber. Then I crept from my hiding-place, and hurriedly returned to my cell.

X.

I WENT to the bed, and taking one of the thin, soft leather sheets of which it was made, tore off two strips, and wound them securely about my shoes. This was a precaution that I ought to have taken before. The close proximity of Pabor and the sergeant had brought forcibly to my mind the need of muffling my shoes, so that I could move about noiselessly.

When I had accomplished this to my satisfaction, I set out once more with my lantern. I directed my steps toward the main entrance, determined to escape from the building, if possible.

I halted at the entrance, and looked out upon the court-yard. The rays from my lantern illuminated the space between the building and the wall by which it was surrounded. Within this enclosure there were a dozen or fifteen men pacing silently up and down. Each carried the murderous-looking short club suspended from his wrist. They did not speak, not even in whispers, although they brushed by each other

every few seconds. Their shoes were evidently different from those worn by the others whom I had seen. They made no sound on the rocky floor.

I realized that it would be impossible for a person to escape from the building while these silent spectres moved up and down before the doorway. I believed, however, that my lantern would enable me to pass them. But even with the advantage which the lantern gave me, I found it a difficult and dangerous task.

Three times I glided out from the doorway, and each time I came within a hair's breadth of colliding with one of the silent but quickly moving spectres.

At the fourth attempt, I succeeded in getting some distance from the doorway and into the very midst of them, and then, with clinched teeth and repressed breath, I at last passed beyond them without detection, and reached the gateway in the wall. This was not guarded. Once outside I hurried away, paying no attention to my surroundings. I had no definite plan in mind; I did not know where my steps were leading to. My sole desire at the moment was to get as far as

possible from my late prison and its ghost-like guardsmen. But, after a time, finding that I was not pursued, I slackened my speed. The knowledge that I was safe for the present gave me momentary relief, which was quickly succeeded by a feeling of utter relaxation. I sank upon the stony floor, and waited until the reaction had passed. When I had recovered somewhat, I sat up and gazed about me. To my great astonishment, I perceived that I was not alone. There were a number of persons stretched upon the hard floor, not more than ten feet distant. There were a dozen or fifteen of them lying three or four in a group. I concluded that each group was a family. I could see the children lying near their parents. The women were distinguishable by their long hair, which was unbound. The women of this place always wore their hair in this fashion. These people were asleep, apparently, and unconscious of my presence. Looking beyond them, I perceived something which at first sight seemed to be a small cave, its floor covered with stones of various shapes and sizes. Closer inspection revealed that what I had taken for the roof of the cave was a large flat stone, one edge

of which rested on the floor, the other being elevated high in the air, and supported by a contrivance which greatly resembled an upright figure 4. But what struck me as most singular was the fact that there were two groups, or families, sleeping directly under this huge stone. If by any chance the support, which held it in an elevated position, gave way, the immense stone, many tons in weight, would certainly fall and crush them. Why had they chosen that for a sleeping-place? There was an abundance of room outside.

While I was still regarding the strange scene, I became conscious that some persons behind me were conversing in low tones. My first thought was to secrete my lantern; but, remembering that I was among blind people, I arose and crept softly back in the direction of the voices. A moment later the rays from my lantern disclosed to me an old couple sitting together upon a slight rise in the floor.

"Why don't you lie down, and try to sleep?" she asked him. "You must rest, and preserve your strength, or you'll be too weak to work, if you ever get the chance."

"Very few chances for any one, these late years," he said, gloomily: "When I was a young man, there was somebody killed every turn. Then a fellow could get a place occasionally. They never kill any one now, and I don't know what's going to become of us." After a pause he asked, "Did I tell you that I had discovered the Dudleys?"

"Discovered them!" she exclaimed. "Why, I knew their whereabouts for a year past."

"You did, eh!" he cried, with sudden fierceness.

"To be sure, I did. Where did you think I obtained the sub which kept us alive?"

"Yes, yes," he said, bitterly; "but I'm sorry you begged from them."

"And why not from them? I never met kinder people. They never assume to be vastly better and wiser than the beggar. Their gifts are never accompanied by lamentations on the general lack of economy."

"But didn't you know that Little would pay a liberal reward for information that would lead to their arrest?" he asked, peevishly.

"Well?"

"Well; I intend to secure the reward without delay."

"You! — you inform on the Dudleys! They have fed you for a year."

"They have only half fed me. I'm starving now."

"You're an ungrateful old wretch!"

"I've been most ungrateful to myself. It shall not be so any longer."

The old woman bowed her head upon her hands, but made no reply; and he resumed, while his limbs trembled with weakness or excitement, —

"Why must we sit here from year's end to year's end without light, or heat, or comfort? Why don't they march forward, and permit us to ascend above this dismal place?"

"But the Dudleys are not to blame. They are not hindering the procession," the woman said, her head still bowed upon her hands.

"Yes, wife, they are. It is they and their kind that prevent progress. If those on the plain would only move upward, the whole procession could advance. They have eyes, and can see; and they could lead us out of the difficulty. I

know it; I feel it in my blood, and it makes me desperate, and even blood-thirsty at times. But, no; instead of climbing upward themselves, they shout to us, from their high place on the hillside, to be patient; that it is the king's will that the procession remain as it is. But they lie! The king never sent us on the march simply to enable twenty regiments to climb to the hillside, while the other eighty regiments continue to grope in the darkness of the valley. He did not intend that the procession should halt until the last man in its rear rank had climbed up from the valley to the light and comforts of the hillside." The old man had risen to his feet, and stood before his wife, who still sat with bowed head; the light from my lantern fell full upon his bent, trembling frame, and brought out plainly every feature of his pinched face.

Suddenly there came a low, harsh, grating sound, quickly followed by a loud crash. At the first sound the woman had sprang to her feet, and seizing the old man dragged him in the direction from whence the strange sound proceeded.

"Run! run!" she cried; "there may be a chance for you yet."

He struggled on as fast as he could, but his limbs were weak, he tottered at every step, and I knew that if speed were a requisite for winning the prize, whatever the prize might be, that this old man was distanced at the start.

I had started to follow the old couple and ascertain the reason of their sudden flight, when I heard the sounds of hurrying feet behind me. The next instant a man shot by, running at a rapid rate; he was followed by three or four others; then came a bunch of ten or a dozen, all rushing madly through the darkness. These were the men to win; these silent, swift fellows, who uttered no sound, but bent all their energies to the task of reaching the goal. Behind them came the noisy but defeated rabble; men, women, and children hurrying on after the swift runners, the women dragging the smaller children after them; some held infants at their bosoms with one hand, and with the other dragged larger children behind them, and all were screaming to their male friends, "Hasten! hasten!" Husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers were implored to run faster; scolded because of their slowness, or threatened with many evils if

they failed to win. They swept by like a whirlwind, and I followed at a quick walk. I soon came to a slight ascent. When I climbed this I found myself near the large, flat stone, which I have described as being supported in an elevated position. The dozen or fifteen persons whom I had seen sleeping near by had disappeared; they had joined in the race, no doubt. The two families that I had observed under this flat stone were still there. They had been awakened by the tumult, and were sitting up, listening to the roar of the hurrying multitude.

A little way beyond I found another of these peculiar flat stones, with one edge elevated high in the air, and beyond this another, and then several, until I finally made out that there were a great number of them. In some cases the flat stone was blocked up a few feet only; just far enough to permit the tenants to crawl under. The space under each of the flat stones was occupied by two families; and I perceived that in no case did these families leave their posts to join in the race.

I walked on for perhaps fifteen minutes, when I became suddenly aware that the race was at an

end. The flying multitude had come to a halt. Evidently the goal had been reached. Some of the people were already retracing their steps. Certain scraps of their conversation reached me, from which I judged that the prize had been secured by two men, named Birk and Fayee.

A few moments more brought me to the spot where the multitude had halted, and now stood giving vent to expressions of anger and disappointment. They had formed a circle about one of the flat stones before described. I was astonished to perceive that they made no offer to assist Birk and Fayee, who were struggling desperately to raise this flat stone. With the aid of long levers they elevated the stone a few inches; then one of them, by throwing the weight of his body on the lever, held the heavy stone until his companion had blocked it up with stone chips. Then they procured a larger fulcrum, and repeated the operation. When they had succeeded in raising one edge of the large stone — the other edge seemed to be hinged to the floor by some means or other — sufficiently to permit them to crawl beneath it, they did so, and soon reappeared, dragging out a mangled corpse. They quickly re-

entered and brought forth another, which they laid beside the first, and then turned back to seek for more. I turned away horror-stricken. What I had seen and heard made it all plain to me. These large, flat stones, or crushers, as they were called, were really rude machines which were in operation during certain hours. Two men were required at each machine, and these were called operators. They were obliged to stay close to their machine always. The competition for the position of operator was constant and sharp, and the operator who wandered a few yards from his machine would be likely to find his place taken by another when he returned.

At the end of every sixteen hours the crushers were blocked up, and allowed to remain in that position during the eight hours of the resting turn. The operators and their families slept under the crushers during this turn. The supports that held up the huge stones were not always properly adjusted; and, as a consequence, the heavy stones often fell and crushed the wretches beneath them. The falling of a crusher produced a loud report, and when such a report was heard during the hours of rest the thousands

in the lower valley knew that an accident had occurred which had caused two vacancies in the ranks of the operators, and the thousands instantly arose and rushed madly through the darkness in the direction from whence the sound came. The two men first on the scene seized the levers and began immediately to pry up the huge stone, and to extricate the mangled bodies lying beneath. These two had won the prize for which thousands had raced. They had won the places made vacant by the death of the unfortunate wretches whose lifeless bodies they dragged from beneath the crusher.

“An operator’s position must be highly remunerative,” thought I; “the privileges and profits attached must be great, indeed, when these people struggle so fiercely, and risk so much to obtain them.” I was destined, however, to soon obtain a practical knowledge of the workings of a crusher, which will be described in the next chapter of this history.

XI.

THE disappointed multitude stood about the crusher, some giving vent to their anger in loud tones, and fiercely denouncing a system which permitted such insignificant fellows as Birk and Fayee to win, while better men were left to suffer. Others laughed and chatted gayly over the whole matter. Others still walked slowly away, silent, sullen, and downcast.

"Old Tracy won't run many more races," said a man standing near me. His companion laughed, and then, with some seriousness, said, —

"He will hardly be missed in so large a crowd."

Tracy was tottering slowly by at the time, leaning for support on his wife. I recognized them as the couple whose conversation I had overheard just before the race. I followed them at a short distance.

"Wife," the old man said, in a feeble voice, "we must be near Holland's hut."

"It is a little to the right of us," answered the woman.

"Help me there, wife, help me there; I must beg a mouthful of food. I'm faint with hunger. The race has used me up completely. I ought not to have undertaken it. I might have known that I could not win where there were so many young and fleet-footed competitors."

A few minutes' walk brought them to a round-roofed, one-story stone hut. The old man's summons was answered by an elderly woman. As she pushed aside the curtain that served for a door and stepped out, she asked, —

"Who is it? What do you want?"

"It is I, Sister Holland; old Tracy. I'm hungry. Give me something to eat, and the king's blessing be on you."

"Oh, another beggar; I never saw so many before. There's one here every hour. Why don't you get a place at one of the crushers, and not spend your time annoying decent people?"

The old man, who had just returned from an unsuccessful race for a place at one of the crushers, made no answer, and the woman turned to re-enter the hut, when a voice from the darkness cried, —

"Give him food. Will you let the old man starve at your door?"

The next instant a woman stepped quickly into the ring of light cast by my lantern, and with one glance toward me, swept on to where the others stood at the door of the hut. I perceived that she was not blind, like the others. At the first sound of her voice the old man's pinched face sharpened and hardened; but his wife turned with a look full of gratitude toward the newcomer.

The woman of the hut, with averted face, said angrily, "You injure these people, Sister Dudley; you encourage idleness."

"Never mind," the other replied; "I'll repay you for the loss you sustain by them."

The woman hesitated a moment, and then bidding Tracy and his wife to follow, she entered the hut. The other turned and walked quickly away.

"Miss Dudley!" I cried, hurrying after her, "I have something of importance to say to you."

"Miss Dudley!" she exclaimed, stopping and facing me with a look of astonishment; "it is the second time within a few hours that I have been addressed in that strange way. Can it be that you are — Who are you? What is your name?"

"My name is John Curtis."

"Ah, I suspected so. Your wife addressed me in the same strange —"

"My wife!" I cried, seizing her by the arm. "Where is she? Will you take me to her?"

She shook off my grasp and retreated a step, saying, —

"I cannot; she is, however, in good hands, and recovering her strength. But I cannot understand how you are here. Have you escaped from the guard?"

I related how, with the aid of the lantern, I had eluded the guards stationed at the prison entrance. When I repeated the interview I had overheard between Tracy and his wife, and told of the threat Tracy had made, she buried her face in her hands and remained silent for several minutes.

"I cannot blame them," she said at last, more to herself than to me; "the people here have been kind to us; they have shielded us from pursuit for many years."

She was moving away, when, suddenly recalling my presence, she turned back and said, —

"I am unable to express my gratitude for your kind interest. The information you have given

will serve to place us more on our guard. But I do not know how I can repay you. I am as helpless as yourself."

"If you have access to my wife's cell, you can be kind —" I began.

"I shall do everything in my power to relieve her wretchedness," she warmly interposed. "I would do so for her own sake, and because she is pursued by the same monster that has rendered my life, our lives, miserable." She averted her face, and her whole frame was shaken with emotion. But she mastered her feelings quickly, and again turned toward me. She was weirdly beautiful, standing in the full blaze of the lantern, a wall of inky blackness rising behind her, her hands clasped before her, the finely moulded form showing to the best advantage in the closely fitting shell gown, the dark hair loose and falling in masses over her shoulders and reaching to her waist, her white face — a beautiful face, in spite of its fixed look of melancholy — brought out strongly by its sombre settings. The charm held me silent; but the next instant the spell was broken by voices behind us, and Tracy and his wife emerged from the hut.

"I must follow them," said my companion, "and if possible dissuade the old man from executing his threat. Remain here until I return."

She hurried away in the direction the old couple had taken. I sat down to await her return, and was soon lost in deep and unpleasant thought. I remained so for perhaps half an hour, when, suddenly looking up, I beheld her standing before me. Rising to my feet, I asked, "Did you succeed, Miss — Sister Dudley? or does Tracy still adhere to his determination to inform against you?"

"Tracy! Inform against me!" she exclaimed, almost fiercely. "Who are you?" and then passing her hand wearily over her forehead, she added, "Oh, yes; I remember. I have not seen Tracy, but I have forgotten your name, and when we met." She again passed her hand over her forehead, but I fancied that the weariness was assumed, and her keen eyes were throughout fixed searchingly upon me. I was struck dumb with astonishment. The change in her manner was so complete. Her face, too, had altered greatly; just how or where, I could not tell. Perhaps the lips were too tightly compressed, which gave to the

mouth a hard, cruel expression. All trace of melancholy had certainly disappeared, her face now exhibited defiance and a look of haughty command.

"I have forgotten your name," she repeated, after a pause, during which I had continued to stare at her in blank amazement.

"My name is John Curtis."

"Ah, you are the strange man recently captured by the guardsmen. Have they set you free?"

"I am free," I answered.

"You have escaped them, eh?" she said with a little laugh. "You must be clever. The captain would be delighted to secure you."

"What captain? Where is he?" I asked. "I would —" But with an imperious wave of the hand she said, —

"We'll let that rest for the present. Tell me how you discovered that Tracy had threatened to inform against — me. You have already related the story to me, but I wish to hear it again, and you will lose nothing by humoring my whims. I am powerful, and can befriend you. I can, in fact, conduct you safely beyond the power of the guardsmen."

I repeated the story slowly and somewhat mechanically, my mind filled with strange doubts because of the wonderful transformation my companion had undergone.

She remained silent during the recital, and made no comment whatever at its conclusion. After a moment's silence, she said, "I will send a man here to conduct you to the captain. He will be here inside of half an hour; you will recognize him by the password he will give you." Approaching close to my side, she added in a low tone, "The password is 'Easter.'" Then stooping, she undid the little leather or shell curtains which were fastened in rolls at the top of my lantern, letting them fall down over its sides, and completely shutting in the light. "You will not need the light," she said, "and it is safer to conceal it. Remember the password. Good by."

I heard no sound of retreating footsteps, but I knew that she had departed, and that I was alone in the utter darkness. A dead silence prevailed; I knew, however, that it must be near the end of the resting or sleeping turn, that the crushers would soon renew operations, and that my immediate neighborhood would then be a scene of

activity, filled with busy people. I earnestly hoped that the guide Sister Dudley had promised me would arrive before the people rose from their slumbers. What was that? I thought I heard a noise behind me, but after listening several minutes and hearing nothing, I concluded that I must have been mistaken. My thoughts reverted to the strange woman, and the amazing change that had come over her during the interval between our first and second interviews. Why had she assumed at the second interview to have forgotten me, and the talk we had had a short time previous? It was possible that her memory was strangely defective. It might be a peculiarity of the place. Perhaps these strange people lacked the faculty of memory. I shivered at the thought, and relaxed my grasp on the lantern strap; the lantern fell with a dull thud, and the next instant I was seized from behind. I struggled to free myself, but a noose was quickly passed over my head and shoulders, and drawn tightly about me at the elbows, pinioning my arms against my body.

"I thought you expected me," said a voice in my ear.

"I did not expect so forceful a greeting, though,"

I answered. "I supposed you would approach me with a password."

"Oh, indeed; but, you know, I've forgotten the word. We'll get along very well without, however."

"But why am I bound?" I demanded. "I'm not a prisoner."

"We'll assume that you are a prisoner," he said; "it will enable us to travel with greater safety."

With a hand on my arm he led me forward in the dense darkness without another word. When I again essayed to question him, he ordered me to be silent.

"We cannot hope to escape, unless you preserve silence," he explained.

We walked on in silence for a long time, an hour perhaps, when suddenly he stopped, and having spoken in a whisper to some invisible person, led me on again. We ascended two or three steps, passed through a narrow door, then on for a few paces, through another door; after which, I was suddenly seized, and thrown to the floor. My eyes were useless in that awful darkness. I judged, however, that I was surrounded by six or

eight men ; some held me down on my back, while others strapped me to the stone floor. I implored them to tell me what it meant, but they remained silent. I endeavored to struggle, but was powerless in the hands of the strong, dumb creatures. They bound me so securely that I was scarcely able to move a muscle, and when this was done I felt rather than heard them move away. Shortly after, I heard footsteps. Somebody was evidently pacing slowly up and down a short distance away, — a sentinel, doubtless, standing guard over me.

The stone floor, to which I was tightly lashed, sent a cold chill creeping over me, which was quickly followed by a burning sensation. Sparks of fire danced before my eyes, and there was a roar like the sound of rushing waters in my ears. I felt that my senses were deserting me. I endeavored to call for help, but the cry died in my throat. For a moment I was conscious of an awful sense of suffocation ; the surrounding darkness seemed pressing down upon me ; and then I sank into insensibility.

XII.

I WAS conscious of the cords that held me to the floor, the instant that I regained my senses. Indeed, I was conscious of the harsh bonds before my senses had fully returned.

I could hear in the distance the sounds caused by the falling of the crushers, and I concluded that the marching turn had begun, and that the machines were in operation. There were no other sounds. All about me was dead silence. The tread of the solitary sentinel whom I had heard a short way off would have been a relief, but he had evidently been removed. The dreadful darkness was more oppressive than ever; it bore down heavily upon me, and seemed about to deprive me of the power of breathing. I prayed for death, and groaned aloud in my agony.

"Ah, Curtis; you've got yourself in a pretty fix."

It was Hart's voice.

"Is it you, Mr. Hart?" I cried.

"It is Hart," he said, gruffly.

"Why am I treated in this manner? If you intend to kill me, be merciful, and end my misery at once."

"We intend to secure your presence with us. We don't desire to lose you again."

"But I cannot live much longer in this position," I expostulated.

"Oh, yes, you can, Curtis; there's no immediate danger of you. Anyhow, I can do nothing for you until Leete comes. You are his prisoner. It was he recaptured you."

"Leete," I muttered. The name sounded familiar. Then I remembered the conversation I had overheard between Pabor and the sergeant.

"When will he arrive?" I asked.

"He will be here soon. It is past his time already."

"Tell him, when he comes, that I have something of importance to communicate; something which concerns him greatly."

Hart laughed, and said, —

"Don't attempt to relate any flimsy stories to him, Curtis; it will do you no good."

"He can judge of the story himself, if he permits me to tell it."

"Well, here he is himself," said Hart, and the same instant sounds of approaching footsteps struck on my ear.

Hart greeted the new-comer, and the latter said, in a low tone, —

"He ought not to be bound down in that manner. Give him the freedom of the cell, but place a guardsman at the door."

They approached me, and Hart began to unfasten the cords with which I was bound. He and his companion then assisted me to my feet, and conducted me to a bed a few feet away. It was, so far as I could judge in the utter darkness, the same bed that I had occupied previous to my escape. Evidently, I was back in my old cell.

Hart told his companion that I had some information to impart, and the latter bade me speak out. I repeated the conversation that had taken place between Pabor and the sergeant. Both men listened in silence. After a while, Leete asked a few apparently unimportant questions, and then lapsed into silence again.

At the end of several minutes, I said, —

"I do not know whether what I have just related is of any consequence or not."

"It is of great importance to me," Leete cried, cordially grasping my hand, "and I will repay you. I will do what I can to render your imprisonment as comfortable as possible."

"There is one favor I very much desire," I eagerly cried. "I wish to see my wife."

"That cannot be granted you," he said; and after a pause, he added, "neither would it be wise. She is in good health, is well treated; but I am told that she is exceedingly beautiful. We do not wish that fact to become known in certain circles. Therefore, we must be careful not to direct attention to her. Do not ask about her; do not mention her name, except to those whom you can trust."

"Poor Alice!" I groaned. "It is true, then. I had hoped that the strange woman was mistaken."

"Strange woman!" he exclaimed. "What woman have you seen?"

"One who has been persecuted by the same monster who now threatens my poor wife."

"Leave us for a time, Hart," Leete said; and when the sounds of Hart's footsteps were lost beyond the cell door, he took a seat beside me

on the low bed, and asked, "Have you seen Sister Dudley?"

"I have no right to talk about any person whom I have seen," I answered. "I do not wish to give information that might injure them."

He placed a hand on my arm, and in a low, strangely earnest tone said, "You must tell me what she said to you."

"I cannot; I won her confidence by doing her a service, and I ought not betray her."

"A service!" he exclaimed. "What assistance did she need? Was she threatened with danger?"

"From a conversation I overheard, I knew that a certain person intended to inform against her, for the sake of the re —"

"Who?" he cried, and his fingers closed upon my arm until I was hardly able to refrain from crying out. "What is the villain's name?"

"He is called Tracy," I answered.

His grasp instantly relaxed, and he seemed relieved; but he remained silent.

"Curtis," he finally said, "I think you are wise in refusing to talk of Sister Dudley. Show the same discretion regarding me. Say nothing about this interview, and do not mention that you

have ever met me. I will send Hart to you with food, and with any orders concerning you that may have come from headquarters."

He rose and walked away, and a few moments later Hart entered and placed a stone tray on the bed beside me. It contained a pitcher of water and a roll of sub. He told me that when I had finished the meal I must accompany him. Orders had been received to the effect that I must be given employment pending the trial.

"When will the trial be held?" I asked.

"Just as soon as Sister Curtis is well enough to be taken to court. You know, of course, that you cannot be tried separately."

"My poor wife, then, is still weak?" I said.

"Between you and me, Curtis, she's as well as you are. But you have some influential friend — Hill, perhaps — working to delay the trial as long as possible. He has induced Mother Russell and her assistants to enter a conspiracy, for the purpose of representing that Sister Curtis is too weak to be moved, when in reality she is as strong as any of us."

I had finished my simple meal, and he soon after departed, taking the tray with him.

XIII.

IN less than thirty minutes he returned and asked if I was ready. I was. He conducted me from the cell, across the large circular hall to the entrance. He spoke to the guard stationed here in a low tone, and then led me along at a rapid rate for fifteen minutes or more. The darkness was appalling. The harsh, grating sounds caused by the crushers were heard in all directions.

Before we had proceeded far, I became conscious that we were passing through the heart of a populous district. Apparently, there were hundreds of men, women, and children about us, chatting, laughing, or scolding, but in the main seemingly cheerful and contented.

They were, I judged, all engaged at some task or other, and they rushed about in the dense darkness with frightful recklessness.

Several of them spoke to Hart, calling him by name, although I could not imagine how they recognized him, unless by the sounds of his footsteps.

At the end of a half-hour's brisk walk we halted, and Hart called out, "Here, Clark! Here's the partner I promised you."

He bade me remain where I was, while he spoke to Clark. They talked together in low tones for a few minutes; then Hart came back to me, and said, "Curtis, Clark, here, will direct you about the work. You are to assist him."

"And do you remain, too?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," he said, laughingly; "I will stay, to prevent you from getting lost again."

I did not understand how I could labor to any advantage in that thick darkness, but I obeyed Clark's instructions, and groped about the best I could.

I soon discovered that we were working at a crusher, such as I have already described. With the aid of long levers we raised the huge flat stone, and propped it up with small stone blocks or "chips," placed one above the other. When this was done, Clark went about with a small stone hammer, and lightly tapped the different sized boulders that were scattered thickly around.

When he had satisfied himself that they were "ripe," he called me to assist him in rolling them

under the crusher. He placed the smaller ones near the base, the larger ones on the outer edge, where the force of the blow would be greatest. Having filled the space under the great stone, he procured a heavy hammer or sledge, made of stone. With this he hammered away the props that supported the crusher, and the ponderous stone fell, first grinding the small stones near its base, and then striking with a loud report on the larger ones that lay farther out. Then we immediately set to work to again elevate the crusher. When this was accomplished, we rolled out the "cracked stones" and replaced them with others. We repeated the operation several times, continuing at it without stopping for about seven hours, at the end of which time Clark said the hour for the "second meal" had arrived.

His food was brought to him by his wife; mine was sent from the prison.

We rested for a while after this meal, and Clark explained to me that the crusher had been hardened by the Sour process. It was so called because the secret was held by a man named Sourjoint. It was known as the Sourjoint process, but had been abbreviated to Sour process.

The crusher itself had been invented and the hardening process discovered by a man named Easter. He was a worthless fellow, always out of step, as it was termed, and seemed incapable of doing any good for himself or any one else. His wife died of neglect while he was working on his invention. Sourjoint was a good friend to him. He furnished Easter with the means to bring his invention into practical shape; but Easter proved unmanageable, and Sourjoint was finally forced to throw him off, and secure the patents himself.

Easter wandered up and down the valley, but never made the slightest effort to get into line and step with his plodding neighbors, upon whose charity he lived.

His motherless boy was wholly neglected. He grew to manhood, and, as everybody expected, with his father's shiftless habits. But, unlike his father, he refused to accept charity. He would neither work nor beg, but he joined the robber gang, and soon became their captain; and was at that time, Clark said, the most skilful, daring, and most successful robber that had ever infested the haunts of honest men.

There were many questions I desired to ask Clark, but he said it was time to resume work. Just then, loud and angry voices were heard a short distance away. I asked Clark what it meant.

"Trouble among the asses," he answered.

"Asses!" I exclaimed. "Those are human voices, surely."

Then he explained that Sourjoint permitted a small number of surs to remain in the neighborhood of each crusher. Sur, he said, was an abbreviation for surplus. The surplus population were called surs. They lived in another part of the valley, on a slightly lower level. Only those employed at the crushers and the hut holders were permitted to occupy the level where the crushers were located. But, as already stated, Sourjoint gave permission to a small number of surs to occupy the space about each crusher. Their nearness to the crushers gave them a great advantage, whenever there was a charge of the surs. Accidents frequently happened, which caused the death of one of the men employed at the crushers. On all such occasions the surs rushed wildly up from their valley, each one

among the thousands hoping that he would be the lucky one to obtain the place death had made vacant.

"The few surs who were allowed to remain in the neighborhood of the crushers," he said, "were called aspirants for place. But we call them asses, because, by remaining here, they enable Sourjoint to make his own terms with us. We cannot object, while there are a half-dozen close at hand ready and anxious to take our places. The asses hold us back; and yet they ought to know that they cannot advance a single step until we have first moved forward."

During the remainder of the turn we were engaged prying open the stones that had been cracked by the crusher. We used wedges, bars, and sledges of hardened stone for tools. In the heart of each stone we found a plate or cake of some soft substance. It was called raw gum, and was about the size of an ordinary dinner plate, but much thicker.

Clark was an experienced hand, and being assisted by his wife and two children, he extracted the gum very rapidly. I made slow work of it, however. I groped about in the thick darkness

slowly, awkwardly, and painfully, often bruising myself severely against the stones among which I labored. All that he extracted belonged to him ; the result of my labor was devoted to the support of the prison.

We worked away steadily for fully six hours, when I suddenly caught sight of a light moving about at a great distance. It moved a short distance and stopped, doubtless near one of the crushers. After a time it moved on again, and I then perceived that it was followed by several other lights.

At first I was puzzled ; but then I remembered that Clark had said that he expected Sourjoint. He visited the valley once a week, to buy up all the gum that had been extracted at the crushers.

I watched the lights for some time, as they danced about from one place to another. They were apparently approaching us, and making frequent stops on the way. I soon after heard hoarse shouts and cries, which I supposed proceeded from those carrying the lights. When Clark heard these cries, he said, " Sourjoint is coming ; we must carry our gum to the table."

The "table" was a flat stone a short distance

from the crusher. We arranged the gum on this table, Clark's share at one end and mine at the other. Our task was hardly completed, when I perceived one of the lights approaching. The man who carried this light walked straight to the table; he was followed by two other men without lights, who dragged a rude-looking stone wagon behind them. It was Sourjoint and his two attendants.

Sourjoint was an old man, with a thin, sharp face, and small, restless eyes. He stood near his lamp, at the opposite side of the table, where he had deposited a long, narrow, leather case. When he opened this case I saw that it was filled with slender strips of a brownish colored substance. These strips were each a yard long, very thin and brittle, and covered from end to end with strange marks. These characters were called the "general's stamp."

Sourjoint laid a few of these strips — yard-sticks, I mentally called them — beside him on the table.

With one of these strips he began to measure the gum Clark had spread out before him. When he had measured one yard of gum, his attendants

carried it from the table and placed it in the cart. The strip with which Sourjoint had measured he then proceeded to break into two parts. One of these parts, which was about twelve inches long, he placed on the table; the other twenty-four-inch piece he dropped into a bag that he wore at his left side. The yardstick was also used as a medium of exchange, and the twenty-four inches which Sourjoint had placed in his bag was the quantity of exchange to which he was entitled for each yard of gum that he collected.

Taking up the twelve-inch piece from the table, he divided it as follows: two inches for the support of the general and his staff, five inches for the support of the guardsmen, two for the prisons, and one for the poor-houses. The two inches that remained constituted Clark's share. He had just fifteen yards of gum, for which he was paid fifteen pieces of yardstick, each piece being two inches in length.

The raw gum collected by Sourjoint was conveyed up out of the darkness to the lighted plain above the valley, where it was prepared for consumption.

The outside covering, or shell, as they called it,

was stripped off, and when dried served for clothing. The pulp, or inner substance, was formed into rolls about the size and shape of an ordinary banana, and was the food upon which these people subsisted. It had been named subsistence, but was commonly called sub. Clark, poor fellow, strutted up and down between the table and the crusher, rattling the pieces of yardstick in his pocket, and doubtless feeling very proud and happy.

Sourjoint, having finished his business, proceeded toward the next crusher, and we were again left in utter darkness.

But the other lights which I had seen in the distance, and which were evidently following Sourjoint, were coming rapidly toward us. The men carrying these lights seemed bent on making as much noise as possible. Some shouted at the top of their voices, some sang comic songs, and others danced and gesticulated wildly. Many of them had small pieces of flat stone fastened to the lower edge of their long shell garments, which rattled at every step; others had these rattlers fastened to their arms, and a few wore them on their heads.

"Here you are!" cried one; "the softest, toughest, best, and most durable shell that ever was worn. The very piece from which the general's uniform was made."

"Now, then; behold me!" another cried. "Sniggs! The great Sniggs! Caterer to the general! The only vender of the only delicious brand of sub! The Sniggs brand!"

Clark seemed displeased because the venders had come so quickly after Sourjoint's departure. He had, doubtless, counted on being able to feel the weight and hear the rattle of the fifteen pieces of yardstick in his pocket for an hour or so longer.

But there was no help for him. The venders came down into the valley once a week only. He would not have another opportunity to procure a supply of food for the coming week. He signified his willingness to patronize Sniggs; and that gentleman quickly lifted a well-filled sack from his handcart, and placed it on the table upon which our gum had been measured awhile before.

"How many shall you require, Brother Clark?" Sniggs asked.

"I'll take four," Clark loftily answered.

Sniggs placed four rolls of sub on the table, arranging them in a line, with their ends touching.

Clark laid down his fifteen pieces of yardstick in a straight line beside the string of rolls. The latter made a line thirty-two inches long; and when Clark moved his hand along to the end of his line, he exclaimed, "I'm about two inches short."

"Oh, that's all right, Clark," said Sniggs. "You can make it up next time."

Then he gathered up the fifteen pieces of yardstick, and Clark seized the four rolls, and after turning them over and over in his hands several times, passed them to his wife. The blind woman stroked the rolls caressingly, and her two blind children, their pinched faces aglow with happiness, stretched up their little hands to fondle the precious sub. Then the woman walked out of the ring of light into the darkness to hide in some secure place their week's supply of food, one roll for each member of the family.

The prison authorities allowed me one roll a day, and I did not think myself overfed.

XIV.

SNIGGS was preparing to follow the other vendors, who, on seeing Clark turn over all his yardstick to Sniggs, had hurried on after Sourjoint to the next crusher.

When Sniggs finally departed, taking his light, and leaving us in darkness once more, Hart approached, and said, "Leete is here, and we'll take a walk; he has something to say to you."

Leete joined us immediately after, and we walked on together.

He explained that he had not time to see me during the marching turn, because he was on duty on the plain. He did not seem satisfied with himself. Evidently he had failed in some of his undertakings, for in a moment he added, "On the plain, where the criminals have eyes, while the guardsmen that hunt them are all blind."

After that, we proceeded in silence. Hart, with a hand on my arm, walked at my left side; Leete was on my right.

Apparently, Lecte had disagreeable news for me, which he hesitated to impart; but just as he seemed about to resume the conversation, we were startled by loud cries for help, coming from a short distance to the right of us. My companions dragged me along rapidly through the darkness; but before we had proceeded a dozen rods the cries ceased, and we heard voices a little farther on. The guardsmen instantly halted. There had been, evidently, a building or some other large object between us and the scene of the trouble, which had completely hidden from me the light that illumined the scene now before me. My eyes soon became accustomed to the light, which I saw was shed from a lamp held by Sourjoint. He stood a short distance away, his back toward us, and gazing at a group of persons gathered near a small hut a little way beyond him. There were two men, a woman, and a child. One of the men was lying on his back, between two large stones. Doubtless he had fallen there while carrying a large flat stone, which now lay squarely across his stomach. His wife and child had vainly endeavored to liberate him; and the other man, whom I instantly recognized as old

Tracy, had been attracted by the unfortunate man's cries, and had come to his assistance. He seized hold of the stone, and with the woman's help, rolled it from her husband's prostrate form. Sourjoint uttered an exclamation of disgust, which attracted my companion's attention.

"That is Sourjoint," Leete said, in a guarded tone; "he has been deprived of a victim, and he is in a rage."

"Who is the other?" Hart asked.

"I think it is Tracy," Leete replied, "but I'm not sure. I have n't heard him speak but once, and then only a word."

My companions relied wholly on the sense of hearing. They did not suspect that I possessed the advantage of sight. They thought me blind, like themselves and all others in the valley. Nor did I think it wise to undeceive them. It might cause them to exercise a stricter watch over me, which I did not desire, for I still entertained hopes of escape.

The man had risen to his feet, and his wife brought forth three rolls of sub, which she offered to Tracy. I knew the old man was hungry, but still he hesitated about taking the food. The

woman and her husband, however, pressed it upon him, and expressed their gratitude for the service he had done them.

Tracy walked slowly away with the three rolls, and Hart took a step forward, but Leete detained him, saying, in a low voice, "Sourjoint is still here. He is waiting for the next chance."

Leete's ears had not deceived him. Sourjoint stood watching the man, who, with his wife and little son, had resumed work.

The poor blind people did not suspect that they were in the full glare of a bright light, and that their every motion was closely watched by Sourjoint.

They were building a stone hut. The walls were up, and the roof nearly finished. There was a pile of small, loose stones against one wall, which enabled the man to climb to the top of the wall, and with a flat roof-stone in his arms he struggled up, placed the slab in position, and then returned for another. He had made the journey several times without mishap, Sourjoint watching him closely in the mean time. But at last the opportunity for which Sourjoint had waited, came. The man stepped on a treacherous

block, which rolled beneath his feet ; he struggled desperately, but was unable to save himself from falling, and a moment later he was pinned down on his back again, with the broad stone slab he had been carrying, lying across his stomach. He called loudly for help, and the woman and child ran to him. But they, unaided, could not relieve him of the stone ; it was too heavy for their strength, and they joined him in calling for help. Sourjoint hastened forward, and said, " Well, my poor fellow, you 're in a bad fix."

" Oh, sir," the man cried, " roll this stone off ; it is killing me."

" I 'm sorry," Sourjoint answered, " but I cannot, I really cannot ; I 'm not strong."

" I 'll give you five yards of gum, if you help me."

Sourjoint remained silent, and the man added, " I 'll give you all the gum I have on hand."

" How much have you ?" Sourjoint asked, quickly.

" Thirteen yards," the man answered, with a groan ; " thirteen yards, worth twenty-six inches."

Sourjoint made no reply, but began to stamp his feet, as if to lead the blind people to think that he was in the act of moving off.

"Don't leave me. I'll accept any terms you may propose. But be quick! This stone is crushing the very life out of me!" the man cried; and his wife echoed his words, while both she and the child turned their faces toward Sourjoint, the tears streaming from their blind eyes.

"But really, I can do nothing to help you," said Sourjoint. "If you made it worth while, I might be able to find help somewhere in the neighborhood. How many yards of gum will you give me a week, for the next six months?"

"I get out only thirteen yards a week," groaned the wretch.

"On condition that I help you out of this trouble, will you pay me eight yards of gum a week, for a term of six months?"

The man writhed under the stone, and rolled his head in agony, but made no answer.

Sourjoint stamped his feet again, as if walking off, and the prostrate man quickly cried out, "Yes, yes! I'll agree to the bargain."

"You agree to pay me thirteen yards down, and eight yards a week for six months thereafter?"

"Yes," he groaned.

Sourjoint stepped forward quickly, raised the slab, and liberated the sufferer.

"Come," said Leete, in a low tone; "we'll return to the prison by a circuitous route. I have much to say to you."

When we reached the other side of the building, I commented on the scene we had just witnessed, and asked if Sourjoint was a member of the robber gang I had heard mentioned.

My companions laughed, and Leete said, "That was not robbery; it was business"; and after a moment he added, "If Tracy had a little of Sourjoint's business sagacity, he need never beg."

"But that other unfortunate man," said I. "Why does he persist in carrying those heavy stones, when he is aware of the danger?"

"He has his hut nearly finished," Leete answered, "and the building of that hut has been his life work. He is now putting on the roof, which is the most trying and dangerous part of the undertaking. When the hut is built, the builder will die. Age and the hardships he has endured are beginning to tell upon him already. After working sixteen hours at the crusher, he hires a youth, a neighbor's son, to keep his place

for him at the crusher during the resting turn ; then he repairs to his hut, and works upon it while his neighbors sleep. He has followed this practice for years, and has compelled his wife and his children, from the time they begin to walk, to assist him. And now that the work is approaching completion, the worker's end is also approaching. He will not live long after the hut is finished."

"It will fall to his children when he dies, will it not?" I asked.

"His children have deserted him ; all but the youngest," replied Leete ; "his daughter is living with vile wretches ; one son has been executed for robbery, the other is now with the robbers."

"Well, he certainly did his best to keep them in line," said Hart. "He is and always has been a very industrious man."

"His industry was misdirected," Leete answered ; "it was directed toward hut-building. All his energies were bent to the task of building a hut, which will be finished the hour before his funeral. If he had labored half as hard to maintain his children in Hill's brigade, he would have accomplished something to be proud of."

"Hill's brigade?" I repeated, inquiringly; and Leete proceeded to explain that many parents, who could afford to dispense with their children's labor, placed them in Hill's charge for a certain number of hours each turn. Hill conducted the little ones to one end of the valley, and assisted them to climb to Observation Table. This table was a large, oblong space, perfectly level, and located at the summit of a very high eminence. The light upon the distant plain could be seen from this table. All the children have their eyesight at birth, but the awful darkness in which they constantly live soon deprives them of the power of seeing. Those under Hill's care are taken to Observation Table, and permitted to gaze at the distant light for several hours each turn. In this way their eyesight is preserved, and when they become young men and women they are fit candidates for the plain.

I was filled with wonder at the strangeness of the whole affair, and also at the unselfishness of Hill, who thus devoted a large share of his time for the benefit of his neighbors' children. I begged Leete to tell me more about Hill, but he said that he had something of more immediate importance to say to me.

"Prosecutor Little," he said, "has decided to bring you to trial at the beginning of the next turn. He has become impatient at the delay caused by your wife's inability to appear at court. She will be spared for the present. If you follow my advice the trial will end favorably, your life will be spared, and I have no doubt you will eventually gain your liberty."

"What do you wish me to do?" I eagerly cried.

"Give information against your late companions," he replied. "Tell all you know about the robbers and their retreat."

"But I know nothing about them."

"Curtis," he said, severely, "you cannot deceive me."

"It is no deception —" I began; but he stopped me, and continued, —

"I have long suspected that you were one of Easter's men. I am convinced now that my suspicions were correct." Placing a hand on my arm, he added, "Sister Easter is in prison."

I did not start, as he evidently expected; and for a moment he seemed disconcerted. But he quickly recovered, and resumed, —

"The robber captain's wife does not usually place herself in jeopardy for a trifle. Something serious is contemplated. No doubt an attempt to rescue is intended, but it will fail; the guardsmen are vigilant; a prisoner cannot be taken from them. Your only hope lies in following my advice; inform against the robbers, and save yourself."

"I have no information to give," I said, firmly. "I know absolutely nothing of the people you call robbers."

"If you change your mind before we part, let me know," he said, quietly; and then, in answer to a question from Hart, he added, "Sister Easter was brought to prison in the character of an old vagrant, but I accidentally jostled against her, which caused her to cry out. I recognized her voice; I did not betray her, however. It was not my business."

Soon after this we halted, and Leete said, "We are at the prison. What is your answer now, Curtis?"

"I have given it," I replied. "I can give no other."

"Very well," he said, abruptly, "I will leave you with Hart."

He grasped my hand, pressed it cordially, and then turned away. A moment later, however, I heard him call out in the darkness, —

“Holloa ! Bradley ; what have you found ?”

“An old fellow, with a very uncivil tongue,” the guardsman answered. He was slowly approaching us with his aged prisoner, Leete evidently following. Suddenly there was the sound of some one falling, and the guardsman exclaimed, “Take care, Leete ! you’ve knocked the old man down !”

“Are you hurt, old man ?” Leete asked, eagerly, as he helped to lift the prisoner to his feet. But the latter made no reply beyond a groan, and as the guardsman went slowly forward with the old man, Leete muttered, “His tongue is as stiff and useless as his legs. I wanted to hear his voice, but no matter ; it’s not my affair, and I must not interfere with the sergeant’s detail.”

He walked away, and Hart led me on toward the prison. He conducted me past the guard, and to my cell. I sank upon the rude bed without removing even my shoes. I was greatly agitated, and did not feel inclined to sleep ; but after tossing about for an hour I finally sank into a deep slumber.

XV.

I WAS aroused by being roughly shaken. My cell was flooded with light from a lantern that stood near the bedside. A tall, muscular-looking guardsman was bending over me, and when I sprang to a sitting posture he quickly slipped a thick leather strap over my head and shoulders, and drew it tightly about me at the elbows, fastening my arms securely to my body. He motioned me to be silent, and shook his murderous-looking club close to my head, intimating by signs that he would use it on me if I uttered a word. He was different from any of the guardsmen whom I had met. They were, in the main, kind in manner and speech; this one, on the contrary, was fierce and menacing. He did not speak, nor would he permit me to speak. Could it be that he was deaf and dumb? And then the horrible situation began to reveal itself. This man was the executioner! He was a deaf-mute. To be able to speak to one's executioner, and to hear his voice in response, would rob death of

some of its terrors. But to suffer death at the hands of this silent giant, who could neither speak nor listen, seemed doubly dreadful.

It was true I had been promised a trial; but it was also true that I had been told that Prosecutor Little exercised almost absolute power. His acts were never questioned. He was cruel and revengeful. Perhaps he had discovered that the prison officials had conspired to delay the trial as long as possible; or may be he was angered by my attempt to escape, and had ordered me executed without trial.

The mute giant assisted me to rise, and as he led me from the cell he placed a finger warningly to his lips. It was then that it occurred to me that I had seen this man before. But where? For a moment I could not recall him; and then I remembered that shortly after falling into the hands of these strange people, and while being conveyed in the rude stone cart toward the prison, that this man had suddenly appeared with a bright light, and had stood and gazed, with a finger on his lips, at me and my captors.

As he led me across the round room, I perceived at the farther side a man's form

stretched on the floor, and covered with a shell blanket.

The giant halted at the main exit. The rays from his lamp fell upon the guardsmen, who moved swiftly and noiselessly up and down, just outside. Suddenly there was a cry of distress a little distance off. The giant's grip on my arm tightened, and he led me through the doorway, and halted just outside, and close to the wall. The light from his lamp illuminated the small court-yard, and I counted eleven guardsmen moving swiftly to and fro between the prison door and the gateway in the wall beyond. The cries of distress had ceased, but an instant later were renewed. It was, however, a different voice that now called for help. It was the voice of the guardsman who at the first cry had rushed to the rescue.

"Help! help!" he cried. "Guards! guards! help! comrades, help!"

Six of the guardsmen rushed off into the darkness in the direction from whence the cries came. Hoarse shouts were heard, with oaths and curses and other sounds that betokened a fierce conflict.

The guardsman's voice could still be heard call-

ing to his fellow-guardsmen for assistance. He was evidently a prisoner, and was being rapidly dragged away by his captors. And then there came from the same direction a voice that rang out clearly above the din, —

“Easter! Easter!” From the right and the left and from all sides the cry was answered. It was the rallying-cry of the robbers. They had made a descent upon the prison in great numbers, apparently had captured a guardsman, and were now collecting their forces and preparing to retreat with their captive.

The guardsmen who still remained in the prison yard waited no longer, but hastened away to join in the rescue of their unlucky comrade.

When the last of them disappeared through the gateway into the darkness beyond, the grim giant conducted me across the narrow yard, through the gateway, and then turning sharply to the right hurried me on at a rate that taxed my powers to the utmost.

As we proceeded I perceived that the small, round-roofed, stone huts were numerous in this direction. At the end of thirty minutes' walk we entered what seemed to be a small village of

these stone huts. It still lacked a few hours of the beginning of the marching turn, and the people of the village were not yet astir.

The giant stopped before one of the huts, drew aside the curtain that hung in the doorway, and pushed me inside. The curtain fell back into its place, shutting out him and the light, and leaving me in total darkness. Did they intend to murder me in this darkness? If I had but one hand free, that I might grope about and examine the place! I did not wish to remain just inside the door, where the giant had left me, and yet if I moved forward I might fall into some dreadful pit that had been prepared for me. I fancied that I detected a slight noise, as if some one entered through a door at the opposite side of the room.

I determined to remain perfectly still and give them no clew as to my exact whereabouts, but the next instant something brushed lightly against my thigh; a movement of my body had doubtless set in motion the dangling ends of the cord with which my arms were bound. I started violently, and the slight noise attracted the attention of the person at the other side of the room.

"Who is that?" cried a voice. "Is there any one there?"

It was a woman's voice, and sounded familiar; I had certainly heard it before, but I believed it to be a trick to force me to disclose my whereabouts, and I remained silent. She was, or assumed to be, greatly frightened. She seemed to be gasping for breath, and to be groping along the wall, as if seeking for the door through which she had entered. Failing to find the door, she uttered a piercing shriek and fell to the floor. I stood irresolute. There were sounds of hurrying footsteps, and a moment later a man and woman, bearing a light, entered at the opposite side. The strong light dazzled me at first, but I was soon able to make out that the woman was Sister Dudley, and her companion the giant, who had left me a few moments before, but he was no longer dumb. He bent over the prostrate woman, exclaiming: —

"Why, Sister Curtis! What has happened?"

At the mention of my wife's name, I hastened forward, asking for an explanation. The giant turned toward me, saying, "Sister Curtis has swooned; my wife will soon restore her to con-

sciousness. In the mean time I will set you at liberty." While unfastening the cords with which my hands were bound, he explained that he was Easter, the robber captain; and that, with the assistance of his wife, he had rescued us from prison. By assuming the character of a vagrant, his wife had succeeded in gaining access to the female prison, and in a similar manner he had secured admittance to the male department. By a prearranged plan a squad of his men had managed to draw the guardsmen from the prison, and the rescue was, therefore, easily accomplished. There was no time for explanations at the prison, and he had decided to carry me off by force. He had placed me in this hut, with my hands still bound, knowing that my wife would join me, and deliver me from the cords. But, instead of releasing me, she became frightened when she discovered my presence, and failing to find the door through which she had entered the hut, had fallen to the floor in a swoon.

Having released my arms, he was about to conduct me to Alice, over whom Sister Dudley was still bending, and endeavoring to bring back to consciousness. As we approached, Sister Dudley

arose, and answering my bow with a haughty inclination of the head, turned to Easter, and said, —

“Sister Curtis will be fully recovered in a few moments. Shall we not leave them together, while we are perfecting our plans?”

Easter assented; and, after assuring me that he would soon return, followed her from the hut, but with kind thoughtfulness left his lamp with me.

I sat down beside my wife, and drew her head upon my breast. She moaned, opened her eyes, and with a cry of fright struggled to rise; but the sound of my voice quickly reassured her, and, overcome with weakness, she sank back into my arms.

When the first ecstasy of our reunion was over, Alice related all that had happened to her since our capture. Mother Russell and the other female attendants of the prison had been very kind.

“A man named Hill,” she said, “had great influence with Mother Russell, and he not only persuaded her to give me every attention, but he also induced her to report at headquarters that I was very ill, even after I had fully recovered.

He knew that the trial would take place as soon as I was fit to appear in court, and he desired to delay it as long as possible. He has a theory that there are other processions besides this one, but the people here do not believe him. They believe that they constitute the entire population of the world. Hill bases his belief in the existence of other processions on certain signs which he has discovered, and which prove, he says, that some time in the remote past this procession was attacked by another powerful procession. When the men at the head of this procession — the men on the heights and the plain — saw the other procession approaching, they purchased great quantities of sub, enough to last them for a long time, and fled to a place of safety. But the great mass of the people down here in the valley could not buy a month's supply of food in advance. They could never get a supply ahead, and therefore they could not fly from the danger. But they rallied around the food-bearing stones and the crushers, and fought to defend them. They risked limb and life in defence of the wealth of the procession; and when the conflict was over and the danger passed, the men of the plain and

the heights returned and resumed their places at the head of the line. Hill is very anxious to prove that his theory is correct. At present it is not believed. Mother Russell, however, believes it; she thinks Hill a wonderful man. When he examined the clothing worn by us when we fell into this dreadful place, he immediately concluded that we came from some other procession, because there is no material here from which such garments could be made. He has done everything in his power to delay the trial until he could have our garments scientifically examined. With our aid he then hopes to prove the existence of at least one other procession."

"What will he gain by that?" I asked.

"Glory," Alice answered, with a smile. "Mother Russell says that he labors as hard and sacrifices as much as any of his neighbors, who are devoting their lives to the accumulation of little fragments of flat stone, which they call inches. He is striving to establish his theory, so that future generations will remember him and profit by his discovery. I believe, however, that he has another motive. By keeping his mind busily engaged he forgets, in a measure, the great

grief that has darkened his life. Have you heard his story?"

"No," I answered; "it seems that the women in the female prison were more communicative than the men who had charge of me."

"Mother Russell was very kind," Alice said, "and she never tired of talking about Hill, partly to please herself, but chiefly, I thought, to entertain me. It seems that several years ago the Dudleys lived on the plain. They were among the richest and most respectable people there. The family consisted of Mr. Dudley and his two daughters, Ella and Ida. The girls were twins, and were wonderfully alike in form and feature, but in all other respects differed widely. Ella was a quiet, timid, sweet-tempered girl; Ida, on the contrary, was wilful, daring, reckless, and fond of adventure. About this time Easter's name was in every one's mouth. He had joined the robbers a year before, and they made him their captain. His eyesight gave him a great advantage over the guardsmen as well as over his own followers. Besides, he possessed herculean strength and great courage and skill. He soon became a terror to all the people of the plain.

He never raided the valley ; he made friends of the inhabitants of the valley at every opportunity. There were on the plain a few youths and maidens, who saw only the romantic side of his life. They idolized him. Ida Dudley was among the number. Easter often visited the plain, in defiance of the guardsmen. He met Ida Dudley. She made no attempt to conceal her admiration of him. They met frequently, and at last they were married, and she fled with him to the outlaw's camp. It was a severe blow to the Dudleys. They felt the disgrace keenly, and soon after took up their abode in a distant quarter of the plain, among strangers, to whom their bereavement was unknown. Ella's beauty and accomplishments attracted many admirers in their new home. There were two, in particular, who were frequent visitors at the house. Their names were Little and Hill. The former was a small, pompous man. He had been appointed public prosecutor a short time before, and was believed to be the most influential man in the whole procession. Hill, an unassuming, low-voiced gentleman, proved the successful suitor. The day was named, and preparations for the wedding were being made, when Ida sud-

denly made her appearance. She was happy with her outlawed husband, and had come merely to visit her friends. Ella and her father were overwhelmed with dismay. Their new neighbors did not know of Ida's existence. When the situation was explained to Ida, she said that she would depart immediately. Her husband was in the neighborhood, and she would join him and never again appear on the plain. Unfortunately, Hill was approaching the house just at that moment. He observed a muscular-looking stranger pacing up and down near the Dudley residence. He turned toward the house just as Ida emerged from it. She advanced rapidly toward the street. As I have said, the sisters were marvellously alike in appearance. Hill supposed that it was Ella who approached, and he advanced smilingly toward her. Ida had never seen him before. She swept haughtily past, joined her husband, and they hurried away together. Poor Hill! He staggered away, and the Dudleys never saw him again. They would, doubtless, have sought him and explained matters, if they had not been immediately overtaken by another great misfortune. Prosecutor Little was informed that the

robber captain had been seen leaving Dudley's house in company with Ella Dudley. He was, no doubt, overjoyed at the opportunity given him to be revenged for the rebuff he had received from Ella. He procured an order for the arrest of herself and father, and for the confiscation of their property ; but the Dudleys were warned by a friend, and they fled to the valley, where they still live."

XVI.

BEFORE I could ask the questions which the story had prompted, there were sounds of approaching footsteps, and a moment later Easter and his wife entered. I now knew that the woman was his wife, and not Sister Dudley, as I had supposed. Easter apologized for disturbing us, but said that they had decided on a plan which must be put into execution without delay.

The Dudleys would be asked to give my wife shelter, and I would be taken to a secure place on the plain.

"We will be separated again," I said, sorrowfully.

"There is no help for it," he replied. "Your safety depends upon the plan we have chosen."

When I expressed my gratitude and wonder at the interest they exhibited in strangers, he interrupted me, and said that it was his wife's affair. "She wishes to discharge a little of the debt she owes you."

The woman's face softened, as, turning from her husband to me, she said, —

"You informed me of the threat old Tracy had made against the Dudleys. You had seen Sister Dudley, and when I appeared you naturally mistook me for her. You remember your astonishment at finding that the supposed Sister Dudley had forgotten you and all that you had related to her a few moments before. The fact that you could see, were clever enough to escape from prison, and had manifested a friendliness for the persecuted Dudleys, determined me to conduct you to our camp, where you would find safety; but when I returned, I discovered that you had been recaptured by the guardsmen. We found your lantern near the place in which I had left

you. In the mean time my husband had decided to retire from business, and take the exalted place in the procession to which he is entitled by reason of his wealth, but he craved for one more adventure before he abandoned the old life, and he determined to attempt your rescue."

Alice joined me in expressing our deep gratitude for the service they had rendered us.

Easter, however, checked us, and said there must be no further delay; that we must act at once.

Taking the lantern from the floor, he led the way through the door by which they had entered a short time before. This door led into another and much larger stone hut. Huge masses of broken stones piled against its outer walls concealed this hut completely from the view of any person who might chance to pass with a lantern.

The room in which we now found ourselves was small, and evidently was one of the half-dozen rooms into which the larger hut was divided.

Easter stood in the centre of the room, while his wife crossed to the opposite wall, upon which she knocked cautiously.

She was answered from within, and after

exchanging a few words with the person behind the wall, she motioned us to advance. At the same instant an opening appeared in the seemingly solid wall. A thick curtain was drawn aside, revealing a richly furnished and brilliantly lighted room beyond. We followed Sister Easter into this room.

An old man stood erect at the farther side, his arms folded on his breast, and his eyes fixed on us.

Taking Alice by the hand, the robber's wife advanced a few steps, and said, —

"Father, Sister Curtis seeks an asylum; she is a fugitive. Will you give her a shelter?"

"A fugitive from justice?" he said, in a slow, measured way. "And why am I expected to aid in thwarting the ends of justice?"

"Not a fugitive from justice," said his daughter, with some vehemence; "she seeks protection from the villain who has ruined you, and who still pursues my sister. He pursues this poor girl also; she has, therefore, a claim upon your sympathy."

"But I cannot protect all whom he persecutes," the old man answered; "besides, he is an officer

of the law, and I cannot conscientiously interfere with him."

"It is fortunate for you, Father Dudley, that others are not equally scrupulous," Easter said, passionately, as he stepped forward to his wife's side. "The officers have often been intercepted in your behalf."

"Yes, yes," the old man slowly and gravely replied; "it was hardly necessary, though, to remind me that I owe my safety to you."

"No; not to me," Easter quickly said. "I could not have protected you as effectually as it has been done. You have a friend in official circles; he is more than a friend, he has been your guardian angel ever since that hour when you fled from the plain. Did you think that it was all owing to an accident that the guardsmen were all removed from your neighborhood when you began preparations for flight? And how do you account for the fact that your powerful and vindictive enemy has failed to find you during all these years?"

"Hill, I—" the old man began; but Easter interrupted him with an impatient gesture, and said, —

"Hill believes that you are dead. He is labor-

ing for the good of the procession as a whole, and has no time to devote to the individual atoms of which it is composed. Your protector is one who stands high in the councils of the procession; he conceals, as far as possible, the great power he possesses. He has had himself placed near your enemy, in the character of a common guardsman, ostensibly to protect him, but really to watch him, and frustrate his designs against you. You can surmise how well he has succeeded; even now he has on foot a mighty scheme, which, if it succeeds, will greatly benefit you and yours. If it fails, it will ruin him forever. After he has served his regular hours, like his fellow-guardsmen, and while they sleep, he labors to perfect his plans. He dares not sleep nor rest; he labors incessantly, and through it all he is inspired and sustained by a desire to make your daughter and you happy."

"Who is he? Who is this unknown benefactor?" the old man eagerly cried.

"Ask Ella," answered Easter; "she must know. She must have recognized the strong hand that has so often shielded her; surely her heart must have divined the truth long ago."

He had hardly ceased speaking, when a curtain at the opposite side of the apartment was drawn back, and as Ella stepped forth from an inner room, she asked, "Who calls for Ella?"

"I, sister," answered the robber's wife, advancing, and leading Alice by the hand; "Sister Curtis seeks shelter and protection."

With a little cry of surprise and joy, Ella sprang forward and kissed and embraced my wife warmly, and with an arm encircling her waist, conducted her before Father Dudley.

"Dear father," she cried, "you will not refuse this sweet girl the shelter and protection of our home? It was her kind husband, you remember, that warned me of Tracy's evil designs."

She gave me a bow and smile of recognition, and also acknowledged Easter's presence with a bow.

"It shall be as you desire, my daughter," the old man said, after a pause.

"That matter is settled," said Easter, addressing me in a low voice; "you must now take hurried leave of your wife, and prepare to accompany me; we must be at our destination before the beginning of the marching turn."

His voice recalled me to myself. I had been lost in contemplation of the two sisters, who, with my wife and the old man, formed a group a little distance away. The strong light shone full upon them, and, although they closely resembled each other in form and feature, a strange difference was plainly perceptible as they stood there side by side.

The sweet, melancholy Ella appeared timid, shrinking, and ready to fly at the first sign of danger. Her sister was erect, fearless, and haughty. The knowledge of her power and independence had given to the outlaw's wife the bearing of a queen. A sense of security against life's commonest and least important needs gives even the outlaw a superior bearing.

Easter's words reminded me that I must say good by to Alice, and prepare to resume the journey. I had taken a step toward her, when he suddenly placed a hand on my arm and detained me. The same instant a long, low whistle was heard outside. Easter listened a moment, and then turning to the company, he said, "Friends, we must leave you abruptly; your safety, as well as ours, demands it."

Alice sprang toward us ; I caught her in my arms ; and strained her to my breast for a brief instant ; then tearing myself away, I followed Easter. He led me through the outer hut, at the door of which a man was waiting for us.

"Well?" Easter asked.

"The guardsmen are unusually active," the other answered ; "they are assembling near the broken crusher. I fear they are preparing to descend upon this hut."

"That cannot be ; you must be mistaken, Lieutenant ; nothing has happened that would direct suspicion to this place."

"I hope that you are right, Captain, but I have reason to fear otherwise. I will soon know, however. Sneath is among them, and he will report to me when he has discovered their plans."

"And if your suspicions that they intend to raid this hut prove correct, will you attack and disperse them?"

"No, indeed," the lieutenant replied ; "we will surround and capture them. Those who wish to join us, may do so ; the others must remain prisoners."

"Very good, Lieutenant ; you deserve to be captain, and you soon will be."

"And you, Captain? What will you be when I'm captain, — general?"

"No; I'll retire, and live on the fruits of a life of enterprise and industry. But I must not remain here to interfere with your plans, Lieutenant, nor to further jeopardize Curtis's safety. Send Fox to me as quickly as possible. He'll find me near Busche's hut."

He conducted me to a hut a short distance away, and drew me close up against its walls. "Fox will soon join us," he said; "he will take you to the chamber; it would be dangerous for you to be seen on the plain in my company. Besides, I shall be needed here."

"And this chamber," I asked; "how long must I remain there?"

"I greatly fear that you will not be permitted to remain there very long," he said. "There is something unusual on foot. Little must have offered great rewards, or made dire threats. The guardsmen are certainly unusually active. But I hope that you will find safety there until we can discover a better retreat. I cannot send you to our camp, because I do not intend to ever again return to it myself. If Leete could only bring his

undertaking to a successful end, your prospects would brighten greatly ; I fear, though, that he will fail. He needs the support of some very influential person. It is not probable that he can enlist the general's sympathies ; and yet there is no other person in the procession powerful enough to give him the assistance he requires."

"The general !" I exclaimed ; "is he powerful ? I thought Sourjoint was regarded as more powerful than the general, or any one else. The people here are constantly talking about him ; they seldom mention the general. They take their law from Sourjoint ; he permits them to go here or there as he chooses, and I supposed that he ruled the valley."

"That is very true, Curtis ; though I had not thought of it. Sourjoint owns the crushers ; he controls the means upon which the people of the valley depend for subsistence. If they displease him, he can deprive them of the right to live. He is the real ruler of the valley, and through the people of the valley, the ruler of the whole procession. Sourjoint is the one, after all, to whom Leete should apply for assistance."

I asked the nature of the undertaking in which Leete was engaged.

"Never mind, for the present," he said. "Fox is approaching, and you must accompany him without further delay. He will conduct you to Stodel, who is the chief among the servants of the chamber, and is a particular friend of mine. He will arrange it so that you can assume the character of a servant of the chamber. But you must never for an instant forget that you are a mute. The chamber is well lighted; you cannot, therefore, conceal the fact that you have good eyes. But you must not speak, on any occasion. It is by the sound of your voice that the blind guardsmen will seek to detect you. Remember this, and be discreet in all other respects, and you may yet escape."

At that moment a man approached, whom Easter addressed as Fox.

He gave him instructions about conducting me to Stodel, and added, —

"Do not try to talk to him, Fox; he is a mute."

"Poor man!" mused Fox, as he led me away; —
"and we sometimes complain, who are afflicted with nothing worse than blindness."

XVII.

My companion did not carry a lantern. It would be no service to him. He was blind. With a hand on my arm, he led me on through the thick darkness in silence. At the end of a two hours' rapid walk, he suddenly stopped. I put out my hand, and discovered that we were standing before a wall.

"Ho, there!" he shouted. "The guard! The guard!"

"Enter guard," answered a voice. The heavy curtain which closed the doorway was drawn aside, and a flood of light gushed forth. The brilliant light dazzled me, and it was several minutes before I could use my eyes.

My blind companion, however, was not affected by the bright light.

Having conducted me through the doorway in the wall, — this wall was evidently the line which separated the plain from the valley, — he led me on as briskly as before.

When my eyes became somewhat accustomed

to the light, I perceived that we were passing along a broad street. The houses, or stone huts, which were numerous in that quarter, did not border the street in straight lines, but stood in clusters here and there.

The street under our feet was stone, rough and uneven ; the open spaces between the clusters of huts were stone ; the whole aspect was hard and stony-looking. Even the shell garments worn by myself and companion were stone-colored, as were also those worn by the few persons whom we met ; and I fancied that the faces of the latter bore a hard, stony expression.

My blind conductor still retained his grasp upon my arm, and led me on at a brisk walk. At the end of five minutes or so, we approached a long, low, stone building. It was of one story, and its front entrances, of which there were fully a score, were in constant use, streams of people passing in and out continually.

We passed around to the single rear entrance, and my companion entered, and asked for Stodel.

The man whom he addressed called out, "A guardsman wishes to see Stodel !"

I knew that, as a matter of precaution, the rob-

ber had assumed the character of a guardsman while on the plain.

Stodel was found, and, after a few moments' conversation with Fox, he led us to a table, and commanded an assistant to bring us a dish of sub and a pitcher of water. He seemed uneasy, and told Fox that he feared that he could not be of much service to Easter.

"I never before knew the guardsmen to be so eager and active," he said. "They are everywhere. There are four of them here in disguise, serving as assistants to me."

When Fox had satisfied his hunger, he took his leave. Stodel told me to remain at the table, and rest for the present.

The table at which I was seated was at one end of the vast hall, and my position afforded me an excellent view of the place. It was brilliantly lighted by lamps that were fastened to the walls and suspended from the roof of the building. There were four rows of tables, reaching the entire length of the great hall. There were about four hundred tables altogether. These tables were made of stone, as were also the seats near them. The latter, though, were well covered

with shell or leather blankets. The tables were constantly in use, the patrons of the place going and coming continually. Stodel's assistants waited on the guests. Stodel himself was general manager of this vast dining-hall, or chamber, as it was generally called.

This chamber had been established a few years before by the professional men who lived on the plain, and they were its best patrons. The circumstances which led to its establishment were somewhat singular.

The great majority of people on the plain were called traders. They purchased the raw gum which Sourjoint brought up from the valley. They separated this into sub and shell, which they prepared and made fit for consumption, and sold to all willing to buy from them. They sold the prepared sub and shell to the men on the heights, the plain, and in the valley, but their chief market was in the valley. There were but twenty regiments altogether on the plain and heights, the other eighty regiments being in the valley. They depended, therefore, chiefly on the valley men. These valley men were employed at the crushers, extracting gum from the stones

which contained it. The pieces of yardstick that they received from Sourjoint, in exchange for this gum, they gave to the traders in exchange for the necessities of life — sub and shell.

The surs — those who could not get places at the crushers — lived in a quarter of the valley which was slightly lower than that occupied by the men at the crushers.

The surs received assistance from charitable persons, and managed to live, somehow or other. Nobody ever knew just how they lived. But they were eager for employment, and were constantly begging Sourjoint to give them places at his crushers, that they might earn enough to feed themselves and their families. They promised that if he allowed them to operate the crushers, they would sell him gum cheaper than it had ever been sold before.

This enabled Sourjoint to give the men employed at the crushers less and less. He was constantly shortening the pieces of yardstick which he gave them for their gum. He often cut off the stick at both ends. Thus, while the needs of the valley men were yearly increasing, their purchasing power was steadily diminishing.

As a consequence, the traders found on each succeeding trip into the valley that there was less and less demand for their goods. The people needed the goods; they were suffering for them; and the traders were anxious to sell, but the medium of exchange was lacking; the people did not have it. The traders themselves often suffered severely because of their inability to dispose of their goods.

And to make matters worse for the traders, new men were constantly crowding in to compete with them. Every year men came up from the valley to engage in trade. The plain was always well lighted, its huts were more comfortable than those of the valley, and anything was better than breaking stones in the impenetrable darkness of the valley.

It frequently happened that after a few months' experience, the new-comers were forced to return to the valley in despair; but they usually remained on the plain long enough to injure the old traders by their competition. And sometimes the new-comers — especially if they were graduates from Hill's Table of Observation — succeeded in establishing themselves firmly in trade, crowding

out some of the old traders; in which case, the latter went sorrowfully to the valley to break stone, or, what was worse, to join the surs.

This sharp and unceasing competition demoralized trade; and consequently, many of the traders, instead of training their sons to be traders, sent them off to be fitted for the professions, which soon became overcrowded with incompetent men. Men who would have made excellent traders or stone-breakers became lawyers and doctors, and were an injury and disgrace to the professions, and no benefit to themselves or any one else.

The honest, self-respecting physicians held frequent conferences, seeking to discover means by which the honor and dignity of their profession might be maintained.

"Do you know," Dr. Gilbert said, at one of these conferences, "that while people imagine all sorts of queer things, they never imagine that they need medicine when they do not need it? A man may imagine that his leg is broken, or his shoulder dislocated, but when the surgeon comes and finds no bones broken, he says so. He pronounces it a case of simple imagination. But no physician has ever yet found a person who im-

agined himself sick when he was not. There is no instance on record of any physician refusing to dose a patient when called in for that purpose. The fact is, we doctors prescribe when asked to do so, whether we find the person sick or well. And it is not our fault. We must live. A few of the best known members of the profession get all the practice here on the plain and on the heights. The rest of us are dependent on the people of the valley. And the people of the valley do without us as long as possible. They can't afford to buy medical advice. They can hardly afford to buy food. The majority of us do not get enough practice. Hence, when we get a chance, we take it. We sit down gravely and prescribe, whether the person is sick or well, and often when we know nothing whatever of the nature of the ailment. Necessity drives us to it."

The lawyers were no better off. They, too, were holding conferences, seeking to find means by which they could maintain the honor and dignity of the legal profession.

Lawyer Niles said that unless something was done, the time would come when lawyers would not be admitted to decent society; that there

would yet be organizations formed within the procession that would proscribe lawyers. "Tentacles are a disgrace to us," he said, "and there are many lawyers who employ tentacles."

Tentacles was the name given to men who were employed by some lawyers to seek out aggrieved persons, and urge them to prosecute, when they seemed otherwise inclined.

But neither the lawyers nor doctors accomplished anything until after the water-carriers' outrage had been perpetrated.

Four men had formed themselves into a company for the purpose of supplying the procession with water. Previous to the formation of this company, each family had procured its own supply of water from the neighboring lake. The company laid pipes from this lake to the huts, and thus supplied the people with all the water required, and the people paid them a stated number of inches per year.

The water-carriers were doing a fair business, but they desired to do better. They feared, however, that if they charged higher rates, other companies would be formed to compete with them. They determined to persuade the people to give

them the lake, after which there would be no fear of competition.

To accomplish this, they hired all the idle lawyers whom they could induce to enter their service, and paid them extraordinary fees. These lawyers went among the people, and persuaded them that it would be a great advantage to the procession if the water-carriers could be induced to take the lake, and guarantee to furnish water at "reasonable" rates.

The people voted the lake to the carriers.

The decent members of the legal profession were filled with deep disgust and indignation at the conduct of their brother lawyers.

They immediately appointed a committee to confer with the doctors. The joint conference concluded that when all members of the two professions were insured against hunger and want, the necessity of resorting to disgraceful practices would be removed.

They soon after established the chamber, and all lawyers and doctors were pledged to patronize it. Any person willing to pay could procure food in the chamber, or immense dining-hall; but the doctors and lawyers were pledged to patron-

ize it, and pay the unusually high prices, with the understanding that any member of either profession who could not pay, would be given food without charge.

"No doctor nor lawyer need fear hunger," said the projectors of the scheme, "and, therefore, there will be no excuse for resorting to unprofessional conduct."

XVIII.

I REMAINED at the table where Stodel had left me, and watched the guests who came and went. One of Stodel's blind assistants came and sat beside me. I took no notice of him at first, but I soon perceived that he cautiously stretched forth a hand, and with his thumb and finger fastened on the sleeve of my gown, seemed to carefully examine its texture. He soon after arose and walked away.

My gown had been given me while I was in prison, and it occurred to me that perhaps the prisoners' gowns were of different texture from

those usually worn. And this fellow might be a guardsman in disguise.

My first thought was to seek Stodel, and ask his advice. But the next instant I remembered that I had assumed the character of a mute.

While I was still undecided, I saw Stodel approaching. He sat down beside me, and in a low tone said, —

“I have sent a messenger to Easter, informing him that this is not a safe place for you. I had hoped, however, that I could protect you until the messenger’s return. But I am now convinced that it is not safe for you to remain an instant longer. One of the guardsmen, who was here in the disguise of a waiter, has departed suddenly. I’m sure that he has made some discovery.”

He arose, and signing me to follow, led the way to the rear entrance.

Pausing in the doorway, he said, —

“I would advise you to return to the valley as quickly as possible. They have discovered that you are on the plain, and the quicker you leave, the better.”

He pressed my hand warmly, and then turned and entered the chamber.

I quickly crossed the open space that separated the chamber from the nearest cluster of huts, and then proceeded more slowly. I feared to attract suspicion by too much haste.

After I had proceeded a quarter of a mile or more, I suddenly recalled that the street by which I had approached the chamber, when under Fox's guidance, terminated at the front entrance to the chamber; while the street which I now followed led straight back from its rear entrance. I must, therefore, be pursuing a course which led away from the valley, instead of toward it. Doubtless I was on the road to the heights. But I decided not to turn back. Anywhere was safer than the plain just now.

The whole place was brilliantly illuminated by large lamps attached to the roofs and sides of the huts.

There were a few women and children to be seen near some of the huts; the men, no doubt, had gone to the trading quarter.

The road which I followed led me out of the thick of the village, and soon after I found myself climbing a rather steep ascent.

An hour's climbing brought me to another

level, on which there was also a village. This was, evidently, the place usually designated the heights. The village here was smaller than the one on the plain, but resembled it closely in other respects. It was lighted in precisely the same manner.

Beyond the village, I perceived that there rose another ascent much steeper than the one that I had just ascended. The roof of the cavern could be seen over the village, and for the first time I obtained a clear idea of the strange situation.

The procession was at a stand-still on the side of a great mountain. The main body of the procession — eighty regiments — had halted in the valley at the foot of this mountain. A few — twenty regiments in all — had climbed the side of the mountain to the first level, which they called the plain; and a few climbed still higher to the second level, which was designated the heights. This second level was, I judged, a little more than half-way up the mountain. And this great mountain was wholly enclosed within an immense cavern! Daylight had never entered the place. If it were not for the artificial light which was employed on the heights and plain,

both these places would be wrapped in darkness as impenetrable as that in which the men of the valley lived and moved. The illuminating fluid which these people used in their lamps gushed up in tiny streams from the rocky floor.

There was one singular thing about the inhabitants of this village that I had not observed in the village on the plain below. Every person here carried a square-shaped block securely fastened between the shoulders. The women as well as the men were thus burdened. Many of them were very old people, and the oldest seemed to be the most heavily laden.

Closer inspection revealed that these square blocks were made up of many small pieces of yardstick, — the thin flat stone which was used throughout the procession as a medium of exchange.

There was one old woman, with snow-white hair, a short distance away, whose burden seemed altogether too heavy for her. She staggered under it a few steps, and then fell heavily near the door of a hut. Three men and two women rushed out and stood near, watching her. They were, apparently, in a state of great excitement. They were

the old woman's sons and daughters, but none of them offered to assist her to her feet. A moment later they were joined by a tall, grave-looking man. He begged the fallen woman to give her burden to her children, and to turn her thoughts away from it, and fix them upon her king.

"I cannot part with it, indeed I cannot," she wailed; "it is glued to my poor back. It cannot be taken from me without tearing my flesh. Let it remain a little longer."

"But, my dear sister," the grave-looking man urged, "you must dispose of it; you cannot carry it to the other world. It need not be removed until after your spirit has fled; but you must decide how you wish it disposed of, after your death. After you have so decided, you will be better able to fix your thoughts upon the king."

The old woman rolled her eyes, clinched her hands, and writhed and twisted her body in a manner that was fearful to behold.

She was, evidently, in the heat of a fierce mental struggle.

After a time she became somewhat calmer. She had, in a measure, conquered herself.

She gazed around upon her sons and daugh-

ters in silence for several minutes. Finally, rising upon one elbow, she motioned to her youngest daughter, and signified her intention of leaving her entire burden to that young woman.

The latter's face flushed with joy, but all the others began to clamor vociferously against their mother's decision.

"Why do you not divide it equally among us?" they cried. "Why leave it all to her?"

The old woman looked reproachfully at them, but they paid no attention to her. They were glaring alternately at the burden and their younger sister.

The dying woman lay upon her right side, her face turned toward her children. The grave-looking man was at her head, bending over her, and speaking words of hope and consolation.

Suddenly the eldest son sprang over his mother's prostrate form, and seized the burden with both hands. The grave stranger raised his hands and his voice in indignant protest against such conduct. But the excited son did not heed him; he pulled and wrenched the burden with all his strength, endeavoring to drag it from his mother's bleeding back. The miserable woman uttered a

shriek of agony, and fainted as the burden was being torn from her. The inhuman son had secured the prize, but before he could escape with it his brothers and sisters were upon him. The hideous burden, with patches of skin and quivering flesh still clinging to it, fell between them; and then ensued a struggle of appalling ferocity. Hungry wolves maddened by the taste of blood never fought more fiercely than did these brothers and sisters.

The burden was finally torn into pieces; and when each had secured a portion, they all turned to their mother.

The stranger had covered her lacerated back, and as the others approached he looked up and said, —

“It is over. She is dead.”

I turned and fled from the place, overcome with horror.

Surely these people were not human. They were monsters! I made my way as rapidly as possible toward the plain, preferring to face its dangers rather than remain to witness the brutality of the monsters who inhabited the heights. I hoped to be able to cross the plain and descend

to the valley, where I believed I could find Easter or some of his followers.

When I reached the plain I found the street that I had traversed when I fled from the chamber. I followed it until I discovered another street, which diverged to the left. I entered this street, and after a brisk walk for upward of an hour I caught sight of a high wall directly ahead. "This must be the wall which separates the valley from the plain," I thought. "I may yet reach the valley in safety." I hurried on with increased speed, but had not proceeded more than a dozen yards when I was startled by a slight noise behind me. Turning quickly, I beheld a blind guardsman striding rapidly and silently after me. I stepped aside, and stood to allow him to pass. He approached within five feet, stopped, and appeared to be intently listening. I scarcely breathed, fearing to betray my presence. Suddenly I saw his body stiffen, and his hand clench as if he were about to spring. The next instant he raised his murderous stone bludgeon above his head, and sprang toward me. I threw myself down at his feet; he stumbled over my body, and fell headlong upon the rocky floor beyond. I leaped to my feet and hur-

ried to him. The force of the fall had rendered him unconscious. I wrenched the weapon from his hand, and turned in time to see four other blind guardsmen rushing toward me.

I retreated to the nearest hut, and with my back against it, turned to face the enemy.

They advanced cautiously and noiselessly ; they were relying wholly upon their sense of hearing.

When within ten feet of me I commanded them to halt, saying, —

“I am armed ; I can see, and I shall not surrender.”

“It is he ! It is Curtis !” one of them cried exultingly, while another blew his whistle for assistance. The one who had spoken turned as if to walk away ; but suddenly turning toward me again, he hurled his heavy bludgeon at me with terrific force. I tried vainly to dodge the blow ; he had been too quick for me, however, and the weapon dealt me a cruel blow on the cheek and forehead. I would have fallen but for the support of the wall at my back. My senses reeled, and I felt on the point of losing consciousness.

“It’s all over. Poor Alice !” I moaned, as I sank to the floor. For an instant there was a con-

fused sound of many voices, and clearly above it all sounded the robbers' rallying-cry, "Easter! Easter!"

XIX.

I WAS in a dimly lighted room when consciousness returned, with Hill bending over me. I started up to a sitting posture, and gazed wildly around. He forced me gently back upon the shell blankets which formed my bed, and said, reassuringly, —

"You are in my den, and for the present, at least, safe from pursuit."

I quickly collected my thoughts, and recalled the terrible scene through which I passed just before losing consciousness.

In answer to my questions, he said, "You were brought here by some of Easter's men; they had heard that I wished to see you, and besides, they surmised that you would be safer here than anywhere else."

He asked how I fared since my escape from prison, and I related to him some of the scenes I had witnessed.

"Yes, you are correct," he said, when I had described the brutal affair I had witnessed on the heights. "The packs they carry on their backs are made of pieces of yardstick, as you call it. While in active life their surplus yardstick is stored in the temples, but when they retire to the heights, to spend the few last years of their lives in ease and comfort, they wrap up their inches of yardstick into neat bundles, which are fastened to their backs, and carried about by them the remainder of their lives. These packs make very heavy and troublesome burdens. The little pieces of sharp stone often pierce the back and shoulders, causing the wearer great pain during his waking hours, disturbing his dreams, and sometimes rendering sleep well-nigh impossible. When a person carries a pack a very long time, it adheres so tightly that it cannot be removed without causing the wearer great pain. It grows to him; becomes a part of himself, and, generally speaking, the chief part. When he dies, his heirs fight for the pack. Sometimes it is divided among them; at other times one of the heirs secures the whole pack, which he fastens to his back, and follows the example of his ances-

tors. Why they are so eager to thus burden themselves and embitter their declining years, has never been explained."

"There is one thing which appears strange to me," I said. "I have often wondered why the majority of the people remain in the dark valley, when there is an abundance of light on the mountain-side."

"The food-bearing stones are all in the valley," he answered.

"But the stones could be rolled up the mountain-side."

"That is true," he said, "but it would require time and labor. The laborers are already overworked. All their time and all their strength are devoted to the task of procuring food and clothing. They have neither the time nor the ambition for anything else. If they neglect for an hour to struggle for sub and shell, they immediately starve. Even as it is, they often suffer hunger. And yet we all submit, and many profess to admire the singular economy which ordains that the men who extract all the sub and shell that are required by the whole procession, should themselves be the only ones who ever go hungry

and naked. The procession is rooted here. It cannot move forward. The inhabitants of the heights and plain get the necessities of life from the valley. The valley is their base of supplies, and they dare not withdraw from it beyond a certain distance. They cannot advance until the dwellers in the valley have moved upward. The latter are every year becoming more and more firmly anchored in the valley. The crushers are being constantly improved, and the operators are daily becoming more skilful; consequently, their productive power is increasing; but their purchasing power does not increase proportionately. They do not receive the benefits of improved methods. These benefits go to Sourjoint. This is why the number of men required at stone-breaking does not increase in due proportion, while the army of surs is steadily getting larger. If the hours of labor were shortened in proportion to the improvement of methods, there would be employment for all the people in the valley, and no injustice or injury done to any one by the change. It is true, Sourjoint would not have so large a pack to carry when he retired to the heights, but that would be a benefit rather than

an injury to him. He would still have more devil than he needed; more than he could use during his lifetime. The shortening of the hours of labor would lead to the abolition of the surs; they would become stone-breakers, and the stone-breakers would then have the time and the heart to think of something besides mere sub-winning. They could devote a certain portion of each turn to the task of moving the crushers and the food-bearing stones up the mountain-side, where they would be able to live, and bring up their children in the light. The next generation would not be a generation of blind men. When the stone-breakers enjoy the blessing of eyesight, and work in the bright light of the mountain-side, they will be as satisfied as it is possible for unreasonable man to be. The overwhelming majority of the men in the procession are naturally fitted for stone-breaking; and when that occupation is lifted out of the darkness of the valley, and made pleasant and profitable, many who now injure trade by their presence, or bring ridicule upon the professions, would turn to it. They would prefer stone-breaking, under favorable conditions, to the risks and uncertainties of trade, or to the

severe mental toil of professional life. The congested trades and professions would be relieved, and the whole procession would soon be in fine marching condition."

"There is one thing," I said, "that has puzzled me greatly. I know that I am now accused of being in league with the robbers. But before there was any ground for that charge, I was informed that I had incurred the death penalty. What crime had I committed?"

"You had been caught in the act of forcing an entrance to the devil's temple."

"The devil's temple!" I exclaimed. "Pray explain."

He looked at me in surprise, and said, "Is it possible that you have not yet heard of the devil? I will enlighten you on that point. On a certain occasion the people authorized the general to place his stamp on a species of thin, brittle stone, and to issue this in certain quantities, to be used as a medium of exchange, for the comfort and convenience of the whole people. The fools, when they saw this medium of exchange, cried out, 'This is real wealth; it is less bulky, more easily carried, and is not perishable, like gum.'

They called it developed wealth ; after a while it was, for brevity's sake, called 'devel,' and now many call it 'devil.' Every person who possesses more devil than he can use, has a building in which he stores the surplus devil until he is ready to retire to the heights ; these buildings are called temples. You are accused of attempting to rob one of these temples. It is a great crime ; the penalty is death.'

During the conversation I had risen to a sitting posture. There was a dull pain in my head, but otherwise I suffered no evil results from my recent adventure. I was sitting on the edge of the bed, pondering over the strange story Hill had related, when I became conscious of a slight noise behind me, but before I could turn, a cord was thrown over my head and shoulders. I sprang to my feet, but the cord had slipped down and was drawn tightly about me, pinioning my arms to my body. Hart was at my side ; he had entered unperceived, and now held me a bound and helpless prisoner.

"Ah, Curtis," he said, "you are a slippery fellow, but I think I'll manage to hold you this time."

"How dare you enter my den, and lay violent hands upon a guest of mine?" Hill angrily demanded, advancing toward us. "Release him, this instant."

"He is charged with a capital offence," the guardsman slowly answered, "and it is my duty to seize him at the first opportunity. I would arrest him, if I found him a guest at the general's table."

Hill seemed to realize his helplessness, and, after an awkward pause, he said, "But surely it is not necessary to keep him bound in that outrageous manner."

"It is safer," Hart answered, doggedly.

"Safer," Hill scornfully repeated; "are you afraid of an unarmed prisoner?"

"I confess to having very little confidence in my own ability, after what has recently befallen me," replied the guardsman.

"Why? Have you been outwitted?"

"Yes; most shamefully, and by women."

Hill laughed sarcastically, and asked, "Why did n't you resign?"

"Because I was consoled by the knowledge that a wiser man than I had made a much greater

mistake, under somewhat similar circumstances. I was seized with a desire for promotion, and knowing that there was a certain woman in the valley whose arrest would bring me promotion, I determined to hunt her down. I soon discovered, however, that I had undertaken a difficult task. She had the power, or seemed to have, of being in two different places at one and the same time. I became bewildered and discouraged, and finally gave it up in despair. It was then that I discovered that I had been pursuing two women, instead of one. They are sisters, and so far as the ear can detect, are exactly alike ; and Mother Russell informs me that to the eye the resemblance appears even more marvellous."

"Nonsense !" cried Hill, impatiently ; "no two persons are exactly alike to eye or ear. Your ears must be very dull ; and I am more convinced than ever that you should resign immediately."

For some reason or other Hill seemed desirous of rousing Hart's anger. But it was not an easy matter. The guardsman bore his taunts without betraying a sign of anger.

"I was on the point of resigning my position," began the guardsman, "when Mother Russell told

me how a very wise man made a great fool of himself several years ago. He was about to become the husband of one of these women. Her sister had been absent for a long time, — she had eloped with an outlaw, — and he did not know of the sister's existence.

"On a certain occasion, he met the latter in company with her husband, and he supposed that it was his promised bride whom he beheld clinging to the arm of a strange man, and without seeking, or waiting for an explanation, he fled to the valley and hid himself. For the past ten years he has been groping at one end of the valley, and she at the other, each sighing for the other, and yet neither having wit enough to comprehend and remove the misunderstanding."

Hill had taken a step forward; his face was pale, and his eyes were fixed on the guardsman with a look of singular earnestness. The latter proceeded, —

"When I undertook to hunt down Easter's wife, I did not know that she had a sister who resem —"

"'Tis false!" Hill cried, vehemently, springing forward, his hands clinched threateningly.

"'Tis true, Hill!" I exclaimed. "I have seen

the two sisters together." He stopped and turned his white face toward me, while his frame shook violently.

"I shall be led to execution in a few hours, at the most," I continued, "and I have no object in deceiving you. Mother Russell related the story to my wife, and I have seen the two sisters."

He sank down, dropped his head upon the table, and groaned aloud, —

"Why did not Mother Russell tell me this?" he finally asked, in a choking voice.

"Because," Hart replied, "she did not wish to drive you away. They who knew the secret also knew that you would not permit any mention of the affair in your presence. It was known that you had vowed never to be seen the second time in any place in which the name of Dudley had been spoken."

"True, true," he groaned, his head still bowed; "fool that I was. Selfish, miserable fool!"

"The wisest men are often the greatest of fools in their own affairs," Hart said, in an undertone.

Then taking me by the arm, he added, —

"We must be off now; and must hasten, or we shall be late at the court-yard."

XX.

HART led me out into the darkness, and for nearly two hours we walked on, side by side, in silence.

At the end of that time we reached the wall, and passing through to the plain, proceeded rapidly along the broad street that led toward the chamber. After a few minutes Hart turned abruptly to the right, and led me to a low stone building, through its arched entrance and into a large room or hall.

There were a score of men lounging about, guardsmen and others. I perceived two raised seats at the other end of the hall, and near them was a small enclosure. Hart conducted me toward this enclosure, but before we had advanced a dozen steps an old man turned away from a group of guardsmen with whom he had been conversing, and approached us. It was Sour-joint. But how changed! He appeared twenty years older than when I saw him last, a few hours before. His face had sharpened visibly, as

if he had suffered much ; his form was bent, and he tottered as he came toward us.

" A hundred thousand inches lost ! " he exclaimed, clasping his hands in great distress. " A hundred thousand inches ; and we never suspected him ! Nobody suspected him ! "

" Leete is outside ; he desires to speak to you," Hart said, as he brushed by the old man with some rudeness. As he led me toward the enclosure, he added, " The old idiot has just discovered that he has been robbed, and his heart is broken."

Having placed me within the enclosure, with a guardsman on either side, Hart left me, and hastened to join the throng at the other end of the hall.

At that moment I perceived Hill and Leete enter together. Sourjoint hastened to meet them, wringing his hands and moaning piteously.

Hill seated himself among the spectators ; but Leete remained standing, surrounded by a number of guardsmen, while Sourjoint moved restlessly about, telling his sorrowful story to whoever would listen. His shrill voice pierced even to the farthest corners of the hall. " A hundred thousand inches ! A hundred thousand."

There was a slight commotion at the entrance, and the next instant a distinguished-looking man entered, with a woman leaning on his arm. The guardsmen quickly cleared a passage for the strangers, and they were ushered to seats that had been reserved for distinguished visitors.

"That is the great man who has just settled on the heights," the guardsman on my left whispered to his companion.

"He is very rich, I hear," the other answered, "and he is a great addition to the heights. It is said that his taxes alone will amount to fifty thousand inches a year, which will be a great addition to the public treasury."

My eyes had been fastened on the strangers from the moment of their entrance. In spite of their changed appearance, I had recognized them at a glance. It was Easter and his wife. Sour-joint came and stood before them, and seemed to be relating the story of the robbery of which he was the victim; and I judged from some words that reached me that Easter was horrified at the recital. His wife clasped her hands and rolled her eyes heavenward, apparently greatly shocked by this revelation of the wickedness of man.

The judge entered just then by a side entrance. I knew it was the judge, because he took his place on the nearer of the two raised seats.

A moment afterward the little knot of guardsmen near the main entrance parted, and a small old man walked hurriedly in. His hair was white, and a close-cropped white beard covered his face ; he looked neither to the right nor left, but strode quickly to the raised seat, at the other side of the judge's seat. It was Little. The hush that instantly fell upon the large audience was sufficient evidence that this was the prosecutor himself. Leete had stepped out from among the guardsmen, and was now pacing up and down beside Little's seat. He was evidently laboring under some excitement. I observed that his heavy stone bludgeon no longer hung suspended from his wrist ; it was firmly held in his right hand.

The judge glanced at Little, and the latter nodded affirmatively. Then the judge arose, and in solemn tones announced the court formally opened.

While the judge's last words were still sounding through the hall, and before he had resumed his seat, Leete stepped quickly to the prosecu-

tor's side, and placing a hand on his shoulder said, in his usual quiet, firm voice, "You are my prisoner."

"Your prisoner!" gasped Little. He quickly recovered himself, however, and in a loud voice demanded, "Your prisoner, man! For what? Who is my accuser?"

"I am!" Sourjoint screamed, in his shrillest tone. "You villanous hyp—"

"Silence!" thundered Leete. "Remove that man!"

Two guardsmen sprang forward, seized Sourjoint, and bore him struggling toward the door. When the audience turned from Sourjoint to Little again, it was frozen rigid with horror by the spectacle presented.

Leete still stood near his prisoner, his sightless eyes turned toward the door, from whence came the sound of Sourjoint's shrill voice.

Little, taking advantage of the situation, had drawn a guardsman's heavy bludgeon, which he carried concealed about his person; he had raised the weapon above his head, and in another instant it would descend, with crushing force, on the head of the blind guardsman.

I could not cry out; I could not even shut my eyes upon the dreadful spectacle.

Then, just when the blow seemed inevitable, the hand that held the weapon fell to its owner's side, and the old man, his face distorted by passion, frenzy, and disappointment, staggered forward, reeled, and fell to the floor.

The audience that for five seconds had not breathed, now gave vent to a mighty sigh of relief.

"Come, Curtis, you're free," cried Hart, who had approached unobserved by me. I stared at him in astonishment.

"Come, come, man; what ails you?" he asked, dragging me from the enclosure, and toward a side door.

"You have escaped on a technicality," he explained, as we proceeded. "Nothing like a technicality. If it had been known before court opened that Little was a criminal, the court would not have convened; you would have been remanded, and held until you could be brought before his successor. But one of the officials being arrested while court is in session, renders the court irregular, and disposes of the business in hand.

The indictment against you is quashed, because you were brought before an irregular court. If you had been tried and acquitted, the prosecution could have appealed the case, and held you in the toils for months. But you have escaped on a technicality, and there's no appeal from a technicality. It is always better to rely on a technicality than upon your innocence."

We passed through the side door, and entered a small, well-furnished room. The floor was carpeted with shell, the walls were also covered with it, and the floor was thickly strewn with seats and couches of the same soft material.

Hill was pacing the floor excitedly. He advanced to meet me, and shook my hand warmly, saying, "They are on the way; your wife and my adorable Ella. They are expected every moment. It seems an age since I was informed that they, that she, had begun the journey from the valley. I have waited ten years, and thought myself resigned to my fate; but to wait that number of hours now would drive me mad. I can hardly contain myself."

He turned, and strode up and down the room in a fever of impatience.

Easter and his wife had entered, and stood a little distance away, conversing earnestly in low tones. After a time Easter approached and asked Hill to grant him an interview. They left the room together. Sister Easter followed them out, and Hart also took his departure.

Left alone, I sank upon the nearest seat, and pondered upon what had happened to me since my advent to this strange place.

I must have remained in thought for half an hour, and doubtless would have remained longer but for the entrance of Hart. He came in hurriedly, and seemed greatly excited.

"Hill is preparing to return to the valley and to his old life!" he exclaimed.

I started to my feet in amazement, as he continued, "He has discovered a rival for Sister Dudley's hand: one who has a better claim upon her, because it was he who enabled her and her father to escape to the valley; and during the years they have spent there he stood between them and Little's vengeance. It is he who has accomplished the downfall of Little and the restoration to the Dudleys of all their former possessions. When this was revealed to Hill, —

and the Easters were not slow to reveal it; they prefer the strong, active Leete to Hill, the slow dreamer, — he decided at once to return to the valley.”

Poor Hill! An hour before I had seen him in a transport of joy, and now he is again sunk in the depths of misery.

I was so overcome that I did not observe the entrance of my wife, accompanied by the Dudleys. She approached, and flung her arms about my neck before I became aware of her presence.

When the first joys of our meeting were over, and I had exchanged greetings with Sister Dudley and her father, I perceived that Leete, in company with the Easters and two others, who appeared to be persons of great authority, had entered the room. The Dudleys hastened to him, and poured forth their gratitude for the great services he had done them.

My wife and I stood a little apart, and in a low tone I related to her the latest tidings regarding Hill. We were still discussing the matter when a great noise was heard just outside the entrance that communicated with the court-room. The next instant Sourjoint rushed into the room, hold-

ing a large lamp, upturned in his hands, and from which the burning fluid was rapidly pouring. His garments were in a blaze, and he danced about and shrieked and laughed a blood-chilling, unearthly laugh, "A hundred thousand inches! Ha, ha, ha, ha!"

The burning fluid spread with amazing rapidity, igniting the carpet, the furniture, and the wall-hangings. We were all threatened with a horrible death, and for an instant all were paralyzed. But it was for an instant only. With a bound, Leete was upon the maniac, bore him down, and, wrapped in flames, the two rolled and struggled upon the floor. Easter was the first to recover. The giant seized the struggling men, dragged them from the midst of the flames, and wrapped them in blankets from the nearest couch. They had ceased to struggle, and guardsmen, who had entered in pursuit of Sourjoint, were extinguishing the flames which had already spread far into the room, when Alice clutched my arm for support. I laid her upon a couch, and knowing that the danger was over, gave her all my attention. When she was somewhat recovered, I turned to the other occupants of the room. Leete and

Sourjoint had been separated, and now lay side by side on the floor. Dr. Gilbert was bending over the former. Easter was standing at the opposite side of the little circle that had formed about the physician and his patients. The giant's arms were folded on his breast, and his eyes were fixed on the scene beneath him; his wife stood at his side, and next to her were the two officials. Ella had sunk into a seat, and buried her face in her hands. Her father stood behind the doctor, and nearest to me. The old man trembled violently.

"Well?" he said, anxiously, as the doctor rose from a stooping posture.

"He is dead," the latter replied, in his calm, professional tone.

The air was still heavy with smoke, and I assisted Alice out of the small room into the large hall or court-room beyond.

The court-room was empty. I helped Alice to a seat, and a moment later I heard voices, and footsteps approaching. I turned toward the main entrance, and perceived Hill and another enter from the court-yard. I judged from their conversation that Hill's companion was a lawyer into whose care Hill was about to place his pos-

sessions, prior to his return to the valley and a life of seclusion.

I requested Hill to grant me a moment's interview. He shook his head negatively, and was about to pass on, when catching sight of Alice reclining on the seat beside me, he approached and greeted her warmly. Turning to me, he said, with apparent impatience, "You have heard of my decision to return to the valley, and you will attempt to dissuade me. I shall esteem it a great favor if you refrain from mentioning the matter."

"But, surely," I said, "you ought to remain with us long enough to pay the last tribute of respect to one who has proven a faithful friend to those you hold dear."

"What do you mean?" he cried.

I related what had transpired, and described the awful scene we had witnessed.

When I described the manner of Leete's death, he sank into a seat and covered his face.

"His whole life was a succession of sacrifices for his friends. He ought to have been spared this final sacrifice," he said, at last; and then he continued, "There is one consolation: he was happy during the last few hours of his life. He

was confident that he had won her at last. And thank Heaven! I did not assert my claims, and thus darken the only few bright hours that the noble fellow had ever known. But, come; we must repair to my home on the plain. It has been made ready for occupancy. You must be my guests for the present."

Alice looked at me beseechingly. "Oh, John!" she exclaimed, "let us not stay here. There must be an outlet from this horrible cavern. We must find it, and return to our friends."

Hill sprang to his feet, and gazing sternly at her, cried, "Ah, the same blind selfishness which condemns the procession to remain with eighty out of the hundred regiments groping blindly in the darkness and misery of the valley. If the surs would consent to stand up together, — not to rob and destroy; why should they destroy their own? — attention would be attracted, and something done for them. And if the thousands in the valley of the surs and the tens of thousands at the crushers would unite in one mighty protest, the attention of the selfish few would be drawn to them. The few eyes in the procession would be focused upon the blind masses and their condi-

tion, and a remedy would soon be found. But, no! the surs know that every month a vacancy occurs at the crushers, and each of the thousands of surs hopes that he will be the lucky one to secure it. And the men at the crushers know that every year a few climb to the plain, and each of the tens of thousands hopes that he will be the lucky climber next year. And now, you who have eyes and have seen the blind men groping in the darkness of the valley, will desert them, without lifting a hand in their behalf! They appeal to you for help. Their nakedness and the hunger in their faces and in the faces of their children appeal to you, not for charity but for justice. How will the king receive those who have eyes, and yet selfishly refuse to see the tremendous injustice? 'They asked bread, and you gave them stones.'"

Alice laid her head upon my breast, and whispered, "Dear John, perhaps this unhappy procession was revealed to us that we might in our humble way aid it in climbing this mountain of misery. Let us stay."

THE END.

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